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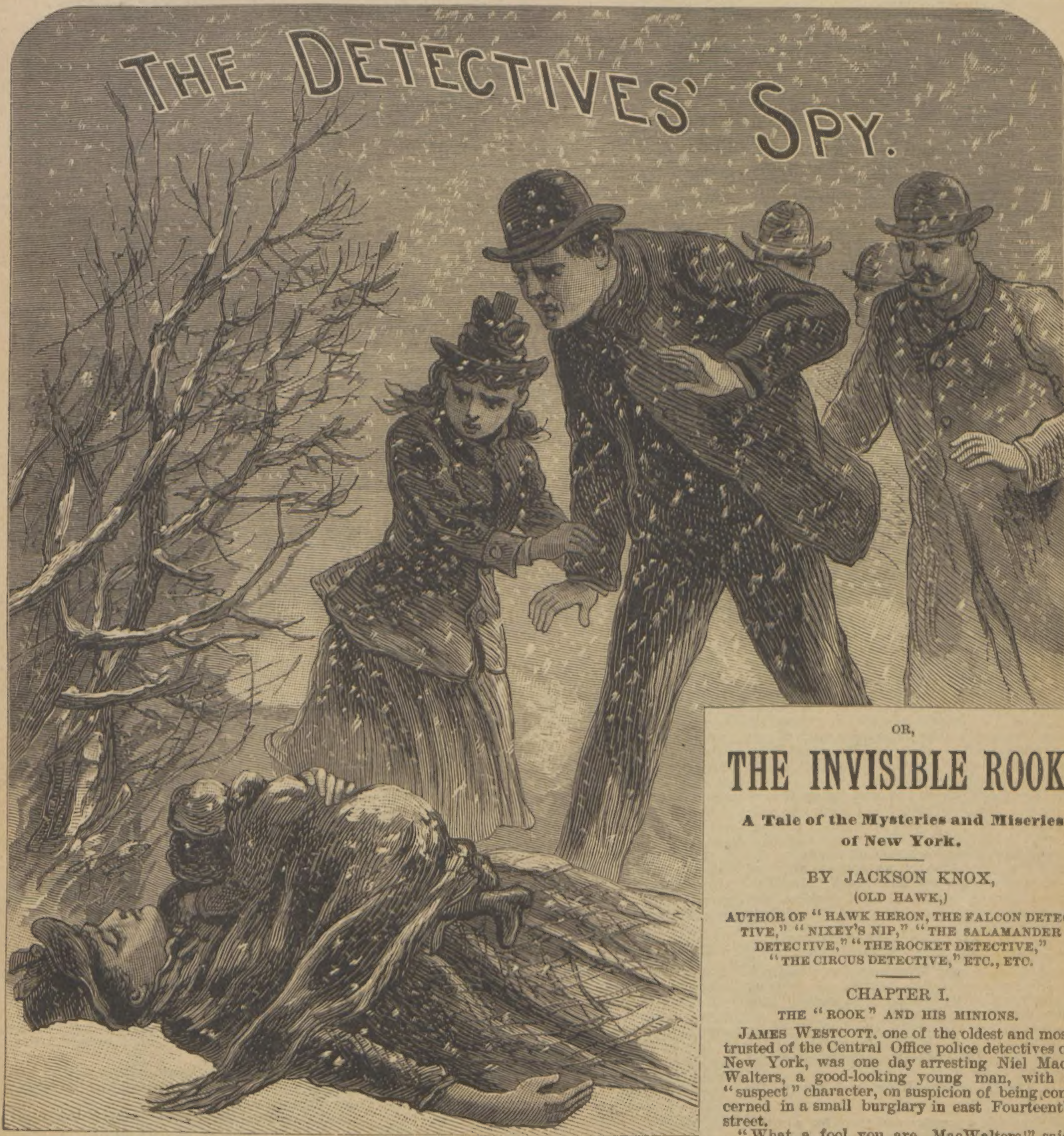
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THE DETECTIVES' SPY.



THE EFFECT UPON THE BEREAVED HUSBAND AND FATHER WAS
AWFUL TO WITNESS.

OR,

THE INVISIBLE ROOK.

A Tale of the Mysteries and Miseries
of New York.

BY JACKSON KNOX,
(OLD HAWK.)

AUTHOR OF "HAWK HERON, THE FALCON DETEC-
TIVE," "NIXEY'S NIP," "THE SALAMANDER
DETECTIVE," "THE ROCKET DETECTIVE,"
"THE CIRCUS DETECTIVE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE "ROOK" AND HIS MINIONS.

JAMES WESTCOTT, one of the oldest and most
trusted of the Central Office police detectives of
New York, was one day arresting Niel Mac-
Walters, a good-looking young man, with a
"suspect" character, on suspicion of being con-
cerned in a small burglary in east Fourteenth
street.

"What a fool you are, MacWalters!" said
the detective, who knew something of the fel-
low's history; "a man of your attainments,

with the iron-molder's paying trade at your fingers' ends, to go mixing yourself up with crooks—the very offal of humanity—to become a perfect slave!"

The emphasis was purposely taunting, for stanch James Westcott was not without a lingering commiseration for his prisoner.

"A slave?" and Niel's fine eyes flashed resentfully from under his moody brows.

"Yes; the veriest, the most abject slave!"

"To whom?"

"To the Rook, and you know it."

Then, as the man remained silent, the detective went on, yet more tauntingly:

"Yes, the Rook. And what do you, or any of your numerous confederates, obtain for the trembling, slavish submission that you all pay to the nameless, the mysterious, the all but invisible scoundrel who rules you as with a rod of iron or a whip of thorns? Bah!"

"Something of this has occurred to me before," muttered MacWalters, in a half-fearful, half-rebellious tone.

Westcott, who would cheerfully have given a year's salary to have laid that same mysterious "Rook" by the heels, saw his advantage, and pushed it.

"I speak nothing but the truth, Mac, and you know it," he continued. "True, your occult master directs the depredations of your gang most successfully. He's a deep one, and no mistake. And when any of you get into trouble, his dollars or his lawyers somehow help you out of it. But, does he ever risk his own lordly person in the crimes that he plans for you? And what does he leave you of their proceeds? A beggarly third, while he gloatingly absorbs the remainder, like an invisible sponge!"

They were passing through the narrow snow-covered streets of the east side on their way to the Central Office. The young man clinched his muscular hands and his eyes blazed afresh, but he still said nothing.

"Besides all this, do you never think of your young wife and child?" pursued the detective. "I knew Mary before you married her, as you must know—as pure, pretty and honest a mechanic's orphan as could be found in 'Mackerelville'—and yet you have already dragged her down to the level of your vile associates—perhaps to wind up by becoming—no better than a thief herself, or—worse!"

"Stop! not a word against her, Mr. Westcott, or—"

The protest came at last in a choked, furious voice, and then Niel MacWalters mastered himself by an effort.

"Pshaw! No more of this sentimental rot, sir, if you please," he added with a hard laugh. "Our lives are what we make 'em, and mine must stand the hazard of the die, as the crook-backed tyrant has it in the play. But, here we are at Headquarters, and you'll soon see you've got the wrong dog by the ear this time."

This was true, though by no means elegantly expressed.

The real perpetrator of the burglary, on suspicion of which MacWalters was being arrested, had, in the mean time, been collared by another detective, with pawn-tickets for the plunder in his possession, and Westcott's prisoner was only brought into the chief's office to be discharged from custody—with the usual warning on his own account, as a matter of course.

"I'm honestly glad, Mac, it wasn't you this time," whispered Detective Westcott, as Niel was passing him in the corridor. "For all that, don't forget my well-meant words to-day."

A good-natured nod was his response, and then the detective compressed his lips sternly, for a bold, reckless smile had leaped into the young mechanic's dark face as he glided away.

"Bad at core, doubtless—scarcely worth the honest advice I've thrown away upon him!" muttered Westcott to himself. "Still, there's something undeniably taking about the young fellow, and I've heard it whispered that he comes of fine stock—the scapegrace scion of one of the richest and proudest families right here in this city. Gammon, most likely; but, odder truths than that have chanced."

But the detective's words had taken deeper root in Niel MacWalters's mind than was supposed; or, rather, they had stimulated therein numerous black-brooding discontents that had long been struggling for open expression.

For it happened that, of all the members of the gang controlled by the "Rook," MacWalters had always been the most reckless and skeptical regarding the power and will of their invisible leader.

The others feared and quaked; MacWalters laughed and scoffed.

One night, not long after the foregoing incident, this recklessness was augmented by drink and anger, and there was an open mutiny over the division of some plunder.

He was in conclave with two other crooks, besides himself and his wife Mary, though the latter could hardly yet be thoroughly categorized in that evil class.

"Oh, the Rook, the Rook, and always the

Rook!" exclaimed MacWalters fiercely. "Who is this hide-and-seek Rook, I should like to know, that he should claim the biggest half of all we risk State Prison or Jack Ketch for? I, for one, have had enough of this cowardly shuffling and submission. Look here! from this night it shall be fair division all around."

The two others started up and looked fearfully around, with pale cheeks.

"Hush!" they gasped. "Good Lord! if the Rook, or one of his spies among us should overhear you, Niel?"

"Do be quiet, Niel!" entreated Mary, with no less anxiety. "All your chums know the Rook's power, though few if any have ever seen him fairly, face to face. One might as well be dead as risk his vengeance."

"That, for his vengeance!" and MacWalters contemptuously snapped his fingers. "When I work for a fair share, I'll henceforth have it. And, hark ye, mates! I've only seen the Rook once—that is, I think I have, in the shape of that beggarly old Wandering Jew of a chap that now and then flits like a shadow in and out of our haunts; but at the next chance I mean to tear off every fence and disguise about him, so that he shall confront me, at least, as Tom Smith, John Brown, or whatever the cunning, greedy hypocrite's real name may be!"

Niel's two pals, with the superstitions of their class, paled to the lips, and sat staring at him, transfixed with terror at his audacity.

"The Scholar's beside himself," whispered one. "Let's slip off. He may get us into a trap, along of his fool-talk."

"Better hang on a spell," returned the other, likewise under his breath. "Might as well hear him out, and you know the Rook pays well for a give-away."

Niel was about to continue his rebellious talk, when Mary ran up to him and tried to place her hand over his mouth.

"Hush! hush!" she pleaded in an agony of fright. "I think I hear stealthy steps on the stair."

"I don't care a curse!" cried her excited husband. "Take off your hand, Molly!—do you take me for a baby, to be frightened by stealthy steps and listening shadows?"

"Hush, dear, hush—for my sake—for baby's sake!"

"I tell you, I will not, and it's for both your sakes that I'm going to make a break of it! Let them hear it and peach who will! I'll unmask him before you all, and make him say what he thinks is his fair portion. The mean coward doesn't even risk his skin in the business. I'll have no more of it!"

"Do you mean to draw out of the gang and work on your own hook, Mac?" cautiously asked one of the confederates.

This was the one who had covertly alluded to him as the Scholar; that and the Schoolmaster being nicknames often applied to MacWalters by his associates, because of his superior intelligence and education. And this, notwithstanding that they had but known him as a stalwart young iron-molder previous to his taking up with their vocation; for, as James Westcott, the humane detective, had surmised, they all knew of something mysterious in the young man's earlier antecedents; and his bearing, even in his dangerous fits of sullenness and anger, hinted of one fallen from far up the social heights into his present depths.

"No, I don't mean to desert the gang, and if you hint at such a thing, Bob, I'll break your head with that jug of my Mary's beer that you're both boozing over," cried Niel, in reply. "But I'm determined to know who the Rook really is, and how long he thinks to make a cat's-paw fool of me."

"Have a care, Mac," cautioned the third man, who rejoiced in the name of Crachitt. "Others have tried that game, only to burn their fingers. How many has he already hunted down for a mere hint of disobedience? Your turn may come."

"Let him try it," returned Niel, in a calmer but even more dangerous tone. "Let the Rook, or any one else, injure me or mine without cause," and he made an unconscious gesture as if to draw his young wife under his wing, "and I'll show him what it is to earn a righteous vengeance!"

"Well, we can send word to him, and hear what he says," said Crachitt, preparing to quit the room with his companion. "But, keep your tongue from tapping that bell-mouth of yours any further. It is already hung too loose in your head. I tell you this for your own good."

The three members of the Rook's gang left, and MacWalters and Mary were left undisturbed in their miserable tenement, where the latter was soon rocking to and fro with her babe in her arms, Niel watching them both with devouring interest.

It was one of the redeeming traits of this young but daring criminal that he loved both his child-wife and the child itself with a deep and unselfish devotion.

The door opened, and a young girl of twelve or thirteen entered.

Despite her rags and a painfully suggestive recklessness of demeanor, she was a singularly

beautiful child, with a face like the Madonna's, but she was smoking a cigarette.

It was a street waif that MacWalters had taken under his protection two or three years previously, before making his final plunge into the gulfs of crime.

"Drop that infernal cigarette, Eva!" exclaimed Niel, unceremoniously dashing it from her lips. "What have I told you of its poisonousness?"

"All right, daddy," and the girl, after caressing baby, fearlessly leaned over the man's lap, with her elbows on his knees. "I'll try to remember better."

"Were you outside on the stair ten minutes ago?"

"No, daddy; I'm just up from the street."

"Well, don't go out again, and I sha'n't be long away." And MacWalters, after a parting look of tenderness at his wife and baby, moodily strode away.

But not a word of Niel's threatening language had been lost.

Whether the Rook had actually overheard the words, or their substance had been treacherously conveyed to him, he was from that hour thoroughly upon his guard.

Even his phantom, as his variously disguised personality might be called, was seen no longer about Paradise Corners, as the residential locality of this special gang of criminals was rather facetiously termed, and he became yet more cautious and mysterious in his communications with his subordinates.

But, like Satan himself, the Rook's plotting brain and demoniac heart were, for all that, never more earnestly at work than now.

A few days thereafter, when no thievery of note had been projected by the fountain-head, when funds were growing scarce in Paradise Corners, and even MacWalters was half-hoping that they were not being wholly deserted by their strange leader, an important communication reached the gang from the Rook.

CHAPTER II.

THE TRAP AND ITS VICTIMS.

THIS communication was to the effect that a certain rich house on Park avenue, unoccupied by its accustomed household at that time, was ripe for being plundered. Entrance could best be effected by a side gate in the yard wall, it being a corner house, and thence by a back door leading into the basement kitchen. The job could be best performed by a single "operator," who might easily "lift" all the silverware and other valuable plunder there was to carry, and would be less likely to attract attention than two or more. MacWalters was best suited for the job, and should have a full one-third for his share; another third to be divided among his pals, the Rook to retain the remainder.

Then followed some minor directions as to the nature of the locks to be forced, the date on which the attempt must be made, and so on, all in the singularly cramped, crooked handwriting (evidently a disguised one) in which the mysterious criminal chief was wont to communicate with his subordinates, or minions, as the case might be.

The Rook's unexpected liberality in this epistle was not the least pleasing of its feature, and even MacWalters's suspicions as to treachery were not for an instant aroused.

But Mary, at the last moment, seemed to have a sudden premonition of ill.

As Niel was quitting their room, on the appointed night, with his kit of burglars' tools distributed over his person, she suddenly clutched and drew him back with one hand, the other being occupied with pressing to her breast the babe, Willie, which was ailing.

"Wait, Niel, wait!" she said, earnestly. "Something just occurs to me. Mightn't it all be a plant, a put-up job? Remember what the Rook might have got wind of!"

"That be blowed! We haven't a jingler in the money-bag as it is, which is all I care for," said MacWalters, encouragingly. "Don't bother, sweetness!"

And, with a parting kiss for both wife and child, he was off.

Half an hour later, at the stroke of midnight, he was in the rear area of the marked domicile, after having forced the wall door with laughable ease, and the outer coast seeming perfectly clear.

The house, to all appearances, was absolutely deserted.

The cracksman first tried the kitchen door with a "jimmy." It resisted stoutly, and skeleton keys were next tried with no better success.

Dropping these tools, he next brought into requisition a "jigger," or center-bit.

Grind, grind, grind! sounded the powerful instrument, and a hole was speedily made clean through the wood, large enough to admit the burglar's hand and arm.

The inner bolts were cautiously shot back, an extra bar displaced from its slots, and the felonious entrance was effected.

Softly closing the forced door behind him, MacWalters gathered up his tools with one hand, and with the other flashed the white blaze

* Mackerelville, a popular nickname for a rather tough neighborhood, round about the East River, foot of Fourteenth street.

of his dark-lantern around upon the comfortable kitchen-interior.

It was promising of a big haul of silver in the dining-room next beyond.

As he advanced, a step on either side startled him.

He uttered a shout of astonishment, dashed the lantern to the floor, and recoiled toward the door.

But it had been noiselessly relocked behind him.

He was violently wrenched aside, two stalwart figures precipitated themselves upon him in the darkness, and after a violent but ineffectual struggle, he found himself handcuffed and helpless.

Then the gas was lighted and turned up, when the entrapped reeled back with fresh consternation.

"Mr. Westcott! O'Dade!" he exclaimed as he recognized the two detectives, who had been concealed in adjoining cupboards in anticipation of the criminal attempt which they had so cleverly frustrated. "Good God! then it was a plant, after all! I have been betrayed!"

"You have, indeed, Niel MacWalters," said Westcott, with stern gravity. "But it was scarcely you that I expected to nab, and I am sorry that it is so—for Mary's and her baby's sake."

"Don't, sir, don't! Betrayed—betrayed! Oh, why did I not see the Rook's hand in it all? Mary did, but I was doltish and unsuspecting. Betrayed—betrayed!"

This was all he could say at first; then he cried wildly:

"Take me away—give me one, five, ten years for it, but I'll be revenged upon him if I hunt him round and round the earth! Oh, the villain! the deep, the designing, the mysterious villain! It is his turn now, but mine will come.—My wife, my child!"

He buried his face in his hands, and his strong frame was momentarily convulsed. Then he partly mastered himself.

"You expected me, Mr. Westcott?" he said. "You were lying in wait for me? That was it?"

The veteran officer nodded gravely.

"What was your tip, sir?"

"This," and Westcott handed him a crumpled paper. "Our chief received it by post this afternoon."

Holding the paper up to the light in his manacled hands, MacWalters glaringly deciphered the scrawl it contained.

It was merely an anonymous warning of the attempt that was to be made on the house, and—indubitably that the source of the blow might be known, no less than its cruelty felt, by the victim—it was in the same cramped, crooked handwriting that had been used in directing the burglary.

The betrayed thief's face was filled with a fixed, ghastly resolve that was not good to see.

"No better proof was needed—but I shall be revenged, I shall be revenged!" he muttered, in a changed voice that was now like the clank of steel. "The Rook's work! the Rook's work! But, God help him and all the rest of the cowardly crew, if Mary and the young one come to harm!"

"Who is this Rook?" demanded the assistant detective, O'Dade, whose theretofore duties had not brought him much in contact with MacWalters and his associates.

"I don't know—no one knows," was the reply. "He is our leader, but might as well be invisible for all that is really known of him. The Rook! he is a powerful shadow, a clutching phantom, a directing Invisibility, an avenging Horror!" he shuddered, in spite of himself.

"Come, MacWalters," said Westcott, eagerly. "Do but give me a clew to lay the Rook himself by the heels and you shall hardly be punished at all for this night's work. That I can safely promise you."

"You capture the Rook. Impossible, Mr. Westcott! With all your shrewdness and intelligent daring, you might as well hope to lay the Devil himself by the heels. He has as many skins as a serpent, as many changes as a tree-toad. That is why he has put up this job on me. It must have come to his ears that I had repeatedly threatened to expose his identity, to tear the mask from his *incognito*; for with the loss of his mystery would come the loss of much of his power to cheat and lord it over his gang, most of whom are ignorant and superstitious. No, it is only a hate, a revenge like mine that can ever run the Rook to earth, and it shall be done. Lead me away, Westcott. Knowing my crime and its penalty, I am content to face the music—and to wait!"

They bore him away to prison.

Through the influence of the chief, to whom the old detective related what he knew of the case, and who, besides being possessed of a fair share of human sympathy, was not without a long-headed look into future possibilities, MacWalters's crime of house-breaking, through Westcott being permitted to give a very palliating version of the offense, was disposed of by a police judge, instead of being brought to the attention of the grand jury.

"Plead guilty, Niel," whispered Mary, who

was present at the trial, with her baby peeping out from under her cloak. "The good Lord will help us both to reform and do better after you have worked it out."

The poor girl was striving her best to look and speak cheerfully, though it was a hard struggle.

MacWalters nodded reassuringly, as much as to say, "Of course!" and then, in a voice which he commanded with difficulty, he acknowledged his offense, as charged.

The justice had also had an inkling of the inner history of the case, so he chose to overlook the fact of the prisoner having been frequently arrested before, though solely on suspicion, and briefly sentenced him to three months in the Penitentiary.

The lightness of the sentence seemed to take many of the spectators by surprise, and one miserable wretched-looking old man, apparently bent and deformed, with spectacled eyes and a long-flowing dirty-white beard, started up from a seat at the rear of the court-room, with a snorting exclamation of anger and disgust as the sentence was pronounced, and then hobbled swiftly up the aisle in the direction of the doors.

Detective James Westcott was having the prisoner in charge.

A lightning-like glance was exchanged between them.

Then the veteran detective had leaped over the dock-railing, and was in pursuit of the seemingly decrepit figure with long, rapid strides.

But he was too late! It had either melted away like magic among the onlookers grouped about the court entrance, or had been gifted with unexpected power to skurry away like the wind immediately upon gaining the outer corridor.

Indeed, more than one of the men recalled having been struck by the apparition of so old and apparently feeble a man suddenly squirming and slipping through the little crowd, and then gliding away with startling rapidity and noiselessness, as if he might have been but an apparition after all.

Westcott returned to his prisoner, with a clouded brow and mortification at the heart.

"Was that the Rook?" he whispered.

There was a sullen half-nod from MacWalters in response.

"I think so, but none can ever know—none can ever be sure," he muttered. "But, what did I tell you? No one will ever run the Rook down—that is, no one but me!"

Mary was waiting at the edge of the rail for a last word as he was being led away.

A long enough pause was permitted the condemned man to kiss both her and the baby, and exchange a few last words.

"Good-by, and God bless you, Mary!" said MacWalters, keeping his nerve well in hand. "When my three months are up, I intend to turn over a new leaf, as Heaven is my witness, and work hard and honestly for you and the baby with hand and brain! Mr. Westcott here told me that 'skippers' and 'airy coves' would be the ruin of me, and I find too late how true were his words. Only try to bear up and keep honest, Molly, till I come out—don't let them hunt you down—and all will yet be well. I mean it from my heart, lass!"

"I'm sure you do, Niel," replied the young wife, striving heroically to keep back her sobs.

"And, don't worry on my account, dearie! I'll soon get work, and I'll toil hard, early and late, Niel, for myself and little Willie here, that is such a living image of your own handsome self, sweetheart, till you are with me again. No, no; don't trouble yourself about me, Niel. Good-by—good—good-by!"

And that was all.

But little did poor Mary know of the struggle in store for her.

Even before she could return from court to her miserable room in Paradise Corners, the Rook's mysterious and peremptory mandate had gone forth that MacWalters, having turned pious, through his wife's persuasion, was lost to the gang forever, and that Mary with her "brat" was to be forthwith hunted ruthlessly out of house, shelter, sympathy and protection.

CHAPTER III.

A LOSING FIGHT.

So black and forbidding were the looks cast upon Mary by her husband's late pals and well-wishers, immediately on her return to her wretched quarters, that she did not wait for any plainer hint, as to the inner meaning of it all, than was so unmistakably evinced by these indications.

Indeed, she did not regret severing from the gang without ceremony, and was, moreover, so fortunate as to have at her command a little money—about thirty dollars—which Niel had once insisted on her secreting away, to meet her own and the child's immediate needs in case of accident or misfortune to himself.

So she made haste to sell out her few tags of furniture for a song, and hired a poor but sufficient room, furnished for housekeeping, in a west-side locality that widely separated her from Paradise Corners and the undesirable denizens thereof.

To this she had her own and her husband's personal belongings removed, with the greatest possible secrecy, on the afternoon of that same day.

Poor Mary! In her simplicity, she now thought she had her path nicely cleared for working her way back to honesty and respectability.

A warm fire was crackling and throbbing in the cook stove of her new apartment; the kettle was tuning up its housekeeping song on the hob; there was already an air of comfort and security about the poor place, which neither the recollection of Niel's plight nor the frown of the threatening November skies from without could wholly darken; a needy mechanic's wife in the same house would take care of Willie, for a trifling consideration, while the mother was looking for work or performing it away from home; and she might soon be in the way of preparing a pleasant surprise in the path of reform for Niel by the time he should step out of prison in the middle of February.

But little did she dream of the deadly and remorseless power of the Rook, and his devilish designs in her case.

Fortunately, she could appear on the streets comfortably, and even tastefully clothed, and at back of this she possessed a wardrobe not wholly meager.

But, upon setting out in her search for employment for the first time on the following morning, a rough-looking fellow purposely jostled her near the door, and then, in response to her angry expostulation—for Mary was not without a high spirit of her own—returned a sneering and not wholly unfamiliar stare.

"So, you're gospel-grinding on the reform racket, by the way of a change?" muttered the fellow, as he skulkingly took himself off. "We shall see."

Mary supported herself against the stoop-railing, trembling and aghast.

It was one of the gang—a certain Crinkly Jake, pickpocket, sneak-thief and criminal at large, who, together with Bob Mint and Tom Crachitt, had been one of her husband's closest pals, though at the same time one of the most servile dreads of and believers in the Rook's mysterious power.

Had she been tracked already, and to what end?

However, as she had never breathed aught against the Rook, the gang, she argued, could have no possible motive in persecuting her, and, moreover, there was nothing for it but to face the worst.

She hurried away through the falling snow, for the winter had set in even earlier, with promises of unusual severity to come.

Mary was not strong enough for very hard work, such as washing and scrubbing, but she was a most expert needlewoman, no less than a capital sewing-machine operator, and it was in this capacity that she now sought employment.

But her search for that day, though persistent, was without success.

Most of the shirt and clothing stores at which she applied were not in need of further assistance; the proprietors or clerks of others eyed her with cold suspicion, while refusing the craved employment, in a manner that excited her own suspicions as to baleful whispers that might have gone ahead of her; others, as an iron preliminary, demanded an account of her antecedents, which she dared not truthfully give, and could not find it in her nature to invent for the occasion; while with yet others her comeliness invited suggestions or insinuations, such as summoned the modest blood indignantly to her cheeks while icing the pulses at her heart.

She returned home to her baby, weary and saddened, but with her resolution unshaken.

The search for work was steadily resumed, but with no better success nor more varying experience than is indicated in the foregoing.

But Mary was no newspaper reader—in fact, she had never been much given to reading of any sort.

She knew nothing of the existence of societies for the assistance of working women in distress, of "Homes," "Shelters," "Refuges," and the like. If she had ever heard of such things, they were dimly associated in her mind with churches, and it must be confessed that these latter were little to Mary's taste.

If not naturally irreligious, she had long been pretty desperate, which is much the same thing.

It is among the desperate, the badgered, the hopeless, not among the confiding, the meek, the believing, that the true Home Mission work of the day should find its work.

A week passed, and Thanksgiving Day came round, without Mary having secured a stitch of employment, unless some mending and making-over for the woman who looked after Willie might be called such.

Thanksgiving Day!

Poor Mary had precious little, she thought, to be thankful for. But she had chipped in with the janitress of the building, a rather sharp-tongued widow woman nearly as poor as herself, for the purchase of a small turkey; and she spent the day as cheerfully, if not thankfully, as might be, with baby, and with writing

a long letter to Niel, which she strove to make encouraging and even blithesome.

But on returning from another wearing, unsuccessful quest on the following day, the janitress, a Mrs. Williams, met her in the lower hallway with a hard look.

"I found this stuffed under the street-door this mornin', Mrs. MacWalters," said she, extending a crumpled paper in her grimy hand. "I wonder who it kin refer to?" And she disappeared into her basement realm without waiting for an answer.

Sick with a wild foreboding, Mary flew up to her room, and lighted a lamp.

Then, as she deciphered the contents of the paper, she sunk into a chair by the cold stove with a face of marble.

It was one of the Rook's characteristic edicts to his criminal gang; and had doubtless been thrust upon the janitress's attention for the purpose of expediting the infamous end in view.

It was as follows:

"MacWalters's Molly is heavy on the reform racket—trying to get honest work, and go on the square. As you value your liberties, block her game—HUNT HER DOWN at every turn. Be sure to let Mac find her dead, or worse than dead, when he hops out of quod. Follow her down on a dead scent, and since she's got no character, give her o.e.
"THE ROOK."

Mrs. McGinty, Willie's care-taker, on entering the room with the child, gave a start on perceiving the young mother's dumb stricken look, for, in addition to Mary's wonted aspect of worryment, there was a new distress, a sort of wildness and terror in her aspect.

"What ever is the matter with you, Mrs. MacWalters?" she exclaimed—for Mary had imprudently omitted to change her name with her lodgings. "Have you just got your death-warrant, child?"

"Perhaps so. But no; what am I talking about? It is nothing—a mere faintness. Give me Willie, Mrs. McGinty; I'll relieve you of him. How nicely he is looking!"

And, dissembling the fresh terror and forlornness at her heart, Mary took the child, and set herself to building a fire in the stove.

"No wur-ruk yet, dearie?"

"Not yet; but I mustn't get impatient. Doubtless next week chances will be better, now that the holidays will be hurrying on."

"Some one was here a-askin' fur ye," said the woman, after observing the other's nervously busy movements in silence for a minute or two.

"When? Who? For me?"

"Fur devil another but yoursell, dearie. It was soon afther the mid-day. A chit of a gur-ri, wid the face of a howly saint an' the costum' of a rag-picker."

"Was it Eva?"

"That was the name. She was cryin' to see your purty face, an' she'll be in ag'in this evenin'."

"Oh, I'm real glad!" exclaimed Mary. "I thought I had lost her. She was my husband's adopted child, Mrs. McGinty, and strangely enough disappeared when I was moving from—from my former quarters to this place. Thank you ever so much!"

And, as the woman went away, not without a commiserating glance behind, Mary really did go on with her simple duties with something of a better heart.

Having cooked and eaten a meager supper, part of which she thoughtfully put away to keep warm for Eva when she should come, Mary managed to get Willie to sleep, and then hurried down to the janitress, whom she found alone in her miserable basement rooms, just off the coal-bins in the cellar.

"I thought you—you might want to see me a—about the strange piece of writing, Mrs. Williams," said she, faintly, but not altogether irresolutely.

The janitress was a gaunt, prejudiced woman, whom the grinding attrition of incessant poverty had combined with a long lifetime of hard, under-paid toil to render callous and mean—there are so many such.

She eyed the shrinking young wife with a stern suspicion, in which there was no trace of the Thanksgiving hobnobbing of a day or two before.

"Was it thieves' writing?" she demanded.

"Yes."

The woman grasped her fiercely by the arm. "Tell me the truth," she exclaimed. "Was you a thief before you came here?"

"I associated with thieves, which is but little better."

"And your husband?"

"He is doing time in the Penitentiary."

There was a half-look of pity in the woman's hard face—perhaps of surprise at unexpected frankness—then she cast off the other with a repellent thrust.

"Your second week's up to-morrer night—you'll have to git out."

Mary quietly put into her hand the amount of her room-rent, and returned up-stairs.

Eva was awaiting her there, with a cigarette between her lips, which, however, she quickly cast aside to kiss her foster-mother with unaffected feeling.

Mary had by this time got her second wind,

after the successive knock-downs she had sustained, so to speak.

She held the girl off and surveyed her a little coldly.

Eva was gaudily, though not expensively, got up, with a positively stunning feather in her rakish hat.

"You were not dressed as now, Eva, when you inquired for me at noon?"

"No, mommy, they wouldn't let me; but since then I have faked these clothes what they had given me—given me for my own."

"Who are they?"

"Crachitt's wife, Blotchy Mag, Kitty Floss, and the rest."

"You were with that crew when I was trying to find you so hard?"

"Yes, mommy; they locked me up, and wouldn't let me get to you."

"And since?"

"Since then no one would tell me where you had fittid, mommy. Then they treated me real good, too. I didn't have anything to do, Blotchy Mag gave me these duds, for my own, and Miss Kitty let me have all the candy and cigarettes I wanted."

Mary, who knew the child thoroughly, saw that she was speaking truthfully, though she could well be otherwise, on occasion.

"Neither of them offered to take you shop-lifting?"

"Only once, mommy, two days ago—Kitty did—but I struck out against her."

"Thank God for that, Eva!" And Mary embraced her fervently; after which she made her sit down to the supper she had kept for her.

Then, after looking to the sleeping child, and surveying the girl steadily for some moments, she spoke again.

"If they treated you so kindly, Eva," said she, "why have you run from them back to me?"

"I don't want to grow up no thief, mommy, and that's the truth," replied the girl, bending closely over her plate.

"Are you sure there was no other reason, Eva?"

The girl lifted up a flaming face.

"Oh, yes there was, mommy!" she blurted out.

"Last night they brought in some strange young men—they—I ran out in the rain, and hid under a stoop all night. Oh, mommy, I can't—I can't tell what they said!"

Mary took the now sobbing girl in her arms.

"I am glad and not glad that you have come back to me, Eva," said she, at last. "Listen. I am not only all but penniless, but the Rook has sent out orders to have me hunted down. Will you remain with me, perhaps to starve in the fight to be honest, or will you go back to—to you know where?"

"With you, mommy, with you!" sobbed the girl. "Sink or swim, with you!"

They presently sunk to sleep in each other's arms beside the sleeping babe.

CHAPTER IV.

POOR MARY!—MACWALTERS'S OATH.

MARY, whose money was now almost gone, shifted her quarters on the following day, with as much secrecy as possible, to a yet humbler and more obscure locality on the same side of the city, but a mile lower down, though she scarcely hoped to evade the Rook's pursuing animosity.

Her sole remaining hope was to pull through somehow until MacWalters's release from prison which, even with the most exemplary behavior on his part, could not happen before the first week in February, and it was now but the beginning of December.

Vain and desperate hope!

The vengeance of the Rook and his slavish, unquestioning instruments was sleepless and inexorable. From that hour the course of the hunted and unhappy woman downward to the end was less by steps than by tottering leaps and flying plunges.

It was like a chute of despair, and, as if nature were bent upon seconding the inhumanity of man, it was a winter of exceptional severity.

Every fresh effort to obtain work was to find that some baleful and obstructive whisper had preceded her.

Eva, after cheerfully braving a month of her foster-mother's hardships, again disappeared, and it was easy to guess the influence that had instigated, or perhaps forced, the desertion.

Her wardrobe went, piece by piece, shred by shred, to the pawnbroker.

With the exception of some occasional slop-shop sewing, which was scarcely better than starvation itself, Mary could obtain no work.

Once, with her baby in her arms, she had desperately entered a shirtmaker's small shop, with her accustomed plea—after hesitating long on the opposite street-corner, she had grown so shabby and wild-looking.

The man looked up from his cutting-counter to eye her insolently.

"Are you straight or crooked?" he demanded.

With the old deathful feeling at her heart, she reeled away without answering, and just outside the door jostled against the indubitable cause of

her rebuff—flaunting Kitty Floss, Bob Mint's shop-lifting pal.

She went up to the girl with a sort of desperate calmness.

"You have done it—you will soon have hunted me, like a rat, to my last refuge in death," she murmured, hoarsely. "He," pointing to the now emaciated child, "may live to curse you, or, God help him! he may also grow up a thief. But maybe it is all one."

The girl muttered some abashed reply about having to follow instructions, and the miserable hunted one flitted away through the piercing wind.

At another time it was Blotchy Mag that stepped in between her and the craved employment, and so the hounding, heart-wringing process went on.

Once she descried the humane detective, James Westcott, from afar. Womanly shame conquered her, and she shrunk from his path, unaware of how anxiously he had been seeking her, and how gladly he would have extended the helping hand.

The dumb, leaden despair was growing steadily upon her, and she had even ceased to write to her husband, through a loathing of letting him know of her straits.

Her Christmas week was like a week of horror, and the holidays slipped by like a nightmare dream.

Could she only manage to live—to pull through somehow—till Niel could get out of jail! Such was her haunting thought, the weak-fluttered embers of her expiring hope.

But it was not to be.

At last even the slop-shop work was denied her, through an unwillingness to trust her with the materials. Her home had become the merest cupboard den, while the ravaging cold and semi-starvation were telling upon both mother and child with frightful rapidity.

At last she found herself ousted from even her last miserable shelter, whose pittance of rent had got beyond her means.

Mary must have become partly insane at this time.

It was in February—though she had latterly taken no note of the passage of time—and bitter cold, with snow on the ground and more in the clouds. It was toward evening when, with her little Willie wrapped tightly to her breast under the folds of her thin shawl, she recklessly entered a shirt-store that had theretofore escaped her search.

"Give me work," she demanded, defiantly; "work, or my child's death and my own be on your head. In the past I have consorted with thieves I—confess it—but we are freezing and starving by inches, my baby and I!"

The proprietor shook his head, but not without a look of supreme pity.

"I really have no work for you," said he, "but wait. I can give you a recommendation to a kindly charitable institution, where I am sure—"

But she had not waited. Since the man couldn't or wouldn't give her the craved and saving work, what was he prating and canting about! Her heart was ice, her brain in a whirl.

She was again on the freezing street, after having first "lifted," unperceived, several shirts from an adjoining counter, and concealed them under her shawl.

Yes; maddened to desperation, Mary had committed her first actual theft!

She flew to the nearest pawnbroker's—a disreputable hole-in-the-wall—and flung down the purloined goods with the accustomed demand.

The wildness of her aspect at once excited the proprietor's suspicions.

"These shirts are laundered already—where did you get them?" he exclaimed. "Woman, are you a thief? If so, I must send for a policeman, unless you can be very moderate in your desires."

But the one word "policeman" had been enough.

"They are stolen!" she gasped. "The owner is—" She gave the address of the shop.

Then she was again on the street, running and panting, as if pursued by not only policemen, but fiends.

As the shadows of night and the snow-flakes began to flock down together, she dreamily found herself entering Central Park, amid throngs of skaters hastening to or from the rinks, and the continuous jingling of sleigh-bells—the pastime-whirl of the rich, the careless and the gay.

She hurried on, though with leaden feet, eager for the quieter and more secluded ways—on, and on, and on.

At gray of the following morning, Niel MacWalters, accompanied by two of his former pals, was madly seeking the whereabouts of his wife and child.

Having unexpectedly shortened his term of imprisonment by exceptional good behavior, he had spent the preceding night stormily upbraiding and threatening the gang, and was now at last upon the loved one's trail.

The searchers were presently joined by Detective Westcott and Eva. The former had rescued the girl, soon after her last vanishment from

Mary's side, just in time to save her from the continued kind offices of Kitty Floss, but not soon enough for her to guide him successfully upon the shifting track of the woman and child whom he would likewise have so gladly befriended.

With the detective's aid, the inquiries had been eagerly and intelligently urged.

At sunrise the party entered the Park, pushing northward for the more secluded ways through the still driving snow.

Presently there was—the end.

They found the objects of their search huddled under the lee of a storm-bowed hazel-clump, frozen stiff, with the shrill wail of the wintry winds for a requiem, the white folds of the heaping drift for their winding-sheet.

The effect upon the bereaved husband and father was awful to witness.

He sprung upon the two thieves, clutching them by the throat, and knocking their hard heads together.

"Your work—your work!" he screamed; "the work of the infernal gang at the Rook's diabolical bidding!"

Eva clung, terrified, to his side, while James Westcott placed a hand upon his shoulder with commiserating sternness, till the half-throttled ruffians were at last cast contemptuously aside.

One of the latter, Tom Crachitt, scowled and said nothing, but the other, Bob Mint, was not beyond being touched.

"I wasn't into it, by the Holy Poker, Niel!" he murmured, shrinking back aghast. "The rest hunted her down at the Rook's command, but I kicked as well as I dared. As God is my witness, had I known as how Mary was at this pass, I'd have taken a fiver at Sing Sing rather than let her go under."

MacWalters waved him back, and then towered over them like an avenger.

"Enough, enough!" he hoarsely exclaimed, in a changed, deadly voice. "You have killed my wife among you—my poor Mary, that was all the world to me—and my boy, my little Willie, that was innocent as the baby angels in heaven! I am alone in the world, with my heart withered, my last hope blasted. Oh! could you not have spared them, and let me suffer alone? Were ye absolutely without mercy, as are the wolves of the forest and the sharks of the sea?"

They both cowered before him now, there was something so awesome in his manner, no less than his words.

"Listen to me, you scoundrels, you wolves!" MacWalters knelt down in the snow beside the poor frozen bodies, upon which he laid his left hand caressingly while raising his right to heaven with impressive solemnity. "Listen to me, I say, you hounds! I'll have hunting for hunting—life for life—despair for despair! I swear by all that is sacred that henceforward I shall live for but one object—to tear the mask from the Rook's diabolical identity, and to hunt him off the face of the earth into the hangman's strangling clutch! And not him alone, but all of you—all, all, as Heaven is my witness!—not a member of the gang, not a born criminal of you, shall escape! Not one of you but shall feel a wronged man's power, a thief's vengeance! It is an oath in Heaven!"

CHAPTER V.

MACWALTERS' LIFE MYSTERY.

THE girl Eva had gone away with MacWalters directly upon the dispersion of the group around the bodies of the frozen waifs; the latter had received decent burial; and then a number of weeks passed without Detective Westcott knowing anything further of the reformed criminal and his adopted child.

Then he began to get occasional wind of MacWalters in a very agreeable and satisfactory manner.

This was in the shape of several anonymous hints, which he felt sure were in the ex-criminal's handwriting, by which he was enabled to make important arrests, solely from among the Rook's gang, much to the advantage of his official reputation, no less than to the benefit of society at large.

These notifications Westcott had not failed to show to his chief, after their efficacy had been made apparent.

"It's blooming fine," was that dignitary's comment, with an "I-told-you-so" air. "I was not far out of the way in putting it lightly on that young fellow. Mark my words, we'll have him transformed into a valuable sleuth-hound in our interest, and that before long."

This prediction was destined to be verified to the letter.

But on a certain day Westcott found placed in his hands a most important and puzzling case, which he thought that MacWalters might materially aid him in.

Yet for a fortnight or more he had had no sign from him, and he had been unable to discover his address.

In this dilemma he was fortunate enough to meet his man face to face, by the merest chance. Niel was very decently dressed, something after the manner of a sober and thrifty clerk, and his bearing was thoughtful and preoccupied.

"I should have given you my address, M

Westcott," said he, after the first greetings, in which the detective had mentioned his desire for co-operation in general terms. "Come home with me now, and we will talk matters over."

"You are doing bravely, Niel," observed Westcott, as they went along together. "Those tips you have been good enough to give me were put to the purpose."

"So I have perceived by the newspapers," was the abstracted reply. "But they were mere trifles—a beginning."

To the detective's astonishment, MacWalters was found to be residing on the top-floor of a lofty distillery building, at present closed pending bankruptcy proceedings, of which he was the watchman and janitor, and which was located on the very border of Paradise Corners.

"Aren't you somewhat imprudent in your selection of quarters, my man?" asked Westcott, significantly.

The ex-criminal smiled in his new, strange way, and tapped a slight protuberance suggestive of a revolver butt under his closely buttoned coat.

"When we are intent upon wolves, or similar game," said he, "do we hug the security of our firesides, or make our hunter's camp at the edge of the wilderness in which they most abound?"

"Have overtures or peace-offerings been held out to you?" asked the detective, after a pause.

"They know better than that." This was said with a repetition of the smile, but with an addition of deadliness in it that left no room for the renewal of the subject.

As MacWalters was applying his key to the stair-door of the building, a thin, seedy-looking man, with a pimply, villainous face and a conceited air, warily approached, and, after a questioning look at the detective, said:

"Mac, the trio have shifted their quarters from No. 54 to 79, and are contemplating no fresh mischief as yet."

Niel nodded and dropped a coin in the fellow's paw, which instantly closed on it with the rapacity of a hawk's hooked claws.

"Am I understood to be still in your employment, Mr. MacWalters?" inquired the recipient, with a grandiloquence of air and flourish that had something comical about it.

"Of course."

"Thanks!" with a dignified bow. "But don't forget what I have frankly told you from the outset, Mr. MacWalters. I am yours to the extent of what I can make out of you—no more, no less. If the enemy should bid higher for my valuable services at any time, I would sell you out as philosophically and ruthlessly as—as I would take my next drink."

"I shall forget nothing, Silas. But, in waiting for me hereabouts didn't you chance to see a white-bearded, spectacled and bent old beggar, who might have been the Rook in disguise?"

The man's bloated face became livid, his teeth chattered, and his knees knocked together.

"Good Lord, no!" he gasped. "Heaven preserve me!" And he scudded around the corner in the most abject terror.

"So you have got Silas Wiener—the slipperiest sneak-thief and the meanest give-away in New York—in tow," observed the detective, as they were ascending the gloomy stairways of the interior.

"Yes."

"He has only a quasi connection with the Rook's gang?"

"That is all; though he fears the very mention of his name."

"So I perceived. But Wiener is an exceptionally treacherous scoundrel, capable, as he said, of selling you out at any moment."

"Exactly."

"Aren't you afraid that he might do so?"

"Not at all; I have him—dead!" And Niel made a slight, but significant gesture with his thumb as he led the way into his rooms.

These were three in number, and much to Mr. Westcott's satisfaction, were decently furnished, with a general air of thrift and comfort.

"You are no longer an iron-molder by trade, I see," said the detective, with a glance at a table, partly covered with papers and writing-materials.

"No; I am a copyist of law-papers. See!" and Niel, though without any pride, exhibited some specimens of his copying.

"Splendid!" exclaimed the detective, with unaffected delight. "Clear and perfect as copper-plate engraving. Why, Niel, you must have had an education far superior to iron-molding!"

"As I write rapidly, no less than well, I have all the copying to do I require," said MacWalters, evasively. "It helps to eke out what I get for guarding the premises here, and will not interfere with my—my main pursuit," and his pale brow darkened.

It was late in the afternoon, and at this juncture Eva entered, with her school-satchel on her arm, and, after a shy little courtesy for the visitor, ran up to MacWalters and kissed him.

Then she laid aside her hat and cloak, and began to make up the fire (for it was raw March weather) and set the rooms to rights with housewifely quietness and dispatch.

Westcott was charmed.

In dress, deportment, and even in moral seeming, the child was no less transformed than the man. He had had and lost a daughter of about the same age, the sweet memories of whom were like a lingering fragrance around his hearthstone when his dear wife and he sat musing there on such evenings as he was off duty.

MacWalters saw the impression created, and seemed glad of it.

"Come to me, Eva," said he. "Leave the housework for the present, and let me examine you in some of your lessons."

The girl obeyed, and the examination—though in rather primary tasks, it is true—was undergone with creditable intelligence and proficiency.

"That will do now, my dear," said Niel, laying down the book. "But I shall want the latest news from Growler Alley before supper-time. Make yourself ready, pet."

"Wonderful!" commented the detective, as the child disappeared. "How in the world have you managed it, Mac?"

"Simply by patience, kindness, exciting her self-esteem, and by constantly stimulating to the surface the germs of virtue that were always alive in the child's nature. But wait a little."

It was not the same Eva that reappeared a few moments later from one of the interior apartments, but a rollicking, half-ragged news-boy, with his papers under his arm, a devil-may-care good-nature in his aspect, and almost nothing to indicate that it was the precocious girl in masquerade.

"Evenin' Sun, dad, Evenin' World, Post, Express 'r Commercial?" bawled the pseudo street Arab, at the top of leathery lungs. "No? What are you made of? You, mister?" to the detective. "Hi! no good, neither on you. Well, here's for a try among the chromos of Growler Alley!"

And away he dashed, with a parting whoop. There was a long pause, after which Mr. Westcott said, with much gravity:

"A singularly precocious child, MacWalters; no one could deny that. But, in view of her past experiences, aren't you a little fearful about taking such risks with her?"

"No—not now. Every day I am grounding her deeper and deeper on truth and principle; and the occasional assumption of these fictitious parts is no less a pastime for her than a useful thing for me. But now to business, my friend. What is your puzzling case?"

They both drew a little nearer to the fire, and Westcott assumed his favorite confidential tone and air.

"We have had only private intimation of it," said he. "A wealthy house has been mysteriously entered and robbed, not of money, plate or jewels, but of an important document—a last will and testament."

"A stolen will?"

"Exactly."

"The maker of it is then dead?"

"Not so; but alive and hearty."

"Where's the loss, then? What is to prevent him making another one, off-hand?"

"Imbecility!"

MacWalters stared.

"It is this way," Westcott went on to explain. "When the will was made, nine or ten years ago, the maker, one of our wealthiest and most prominent retired merchants, was in the full vigor of his intellect. Directly afterward, however, he sustained a mild paralytic stroke, followed by paresis, or something of the sort. He recovered his bodily, but not his mental, health. Being now *non compos mentis*, even an exact repetition of the terms of the will at his dictation, and over his attested signature, would not stand in law in the event of his death."

The young man had become deeply interested. "Was the will stolen, think you, with the intention of destroying it?"

"Or with the design of bargaining for its restoration in the future, it is uncertain which."

"But even if the gentleman should die, leaving no written will, the estate would be divided among the widow and children."

"Not altogether. Without especial devise—ment to the contrary (as provided in the stolen document,) one half the estate—magnificent one—would in some way go to the half-brother of the present incumbent, a rascally lawyer, and the sworn enemy of the family."

Niel had become somewhat agitated.

"I begin to understand," he said. "And hence the family are deeply interested in recovering the written will."

"Just so."

"For any other reasons than those you have named?"

"Yes; for two more. There is a missing grandchild, a girl, the only child of one of the daughters now dead, that was stolen from her home a year or two prior to the making of the will, which, among its other provisions, provides for an untiring search to be prosecuted in her behalf, and for her endowment with what would have been her mother's portion, in the event of her being discovered alive. There was also an only son, who long ago disappeared, after quarreling with his father and becoming the scape-grace of the family. The missing will, contrary to what might have been expected, not only re-

establishes the young man in his rights (he had been temporarily disinherited,) but carries with it the father's fullest, freest forgiveness. In the event of the head of the family dying without leaving a will, the wicked half-brother might readily, it is feared, so manipulate matters as to wholly obliterate these two rightful claims, as recognized in the missing or destroyed document."

The young man's agitation had increased to a painful degree. "With a half-inarticulate exclamation, he sprang to his feet.

"A stolen grandchild! a disappeared only son!" he exclaimed, in a broken voice. "How many compose the family at present, sir, besides the inebriate father?"

"Two—mother and daughter."

"The gentleman's name?"

"Mr. Miles Carlingford."

"My God! my own—that is— Oh, this is torment!" And Niel MacWalters sunk, half-fainting, back into his seat.

CHAPTER VI.

A NIGHT'S ERRAND.

"WHAT'S up with you, Niel?" exclaimed the mystified detective, turning to the young man's assistance. "You are oddly out of sorts, man. Shall I bring you a drop of spirits or beer?"

But MacWalters was speedily himself again.

"No, no, Mr. Westcott," said he, starting up erectly, with a forced laugh. "It was a trifling attack—an unaccountable faintness—and, as for the drink, I was done with that when done with my erst criminal surroundings."

"A good thing!" said Westcott. "I seldom tilt a glass myself, and don't know any one that wouldn't be better off without it." And he strove to appear to make light of what he had observed in the other's excitement and broken words.

"I am sure you won't attach any special significance to my eccentric behavior, Westcott. It isn't likely to occur again."

"Of course, not; don't mention it."

"Now to business, Mr. Westcott. You think I can help you in this case?"

"I do."

"But I can only promise to work in it with my best, my most deadly earnestness under certain conditions."

"And those are?"

"That the Rook or some of his satellites have been concerned in the robbery."

"The deuce! I might have known that, and saved myself the trouble of applying to you."

"Why?"

"Why, the Carlingford house is away up Madison avenue, in Harlem. Little likelihood that the Rook and his down-town gang could have had anything to do with the affair!"

"How do you know that?"

"I don't know it, but only say there's little likelihood of it."

"I am not so sure of it, Westcott. There's a forethought and subtlety in the crime that strikes me as decidedly Rook-ish."

The detective looked up quickly, for MacWalters's judgment had proved so unerring in past services as to compel a sort of respect for his slightest opinion in this line.

"You think so, Mac?"

"Tell me all the particulars you have thus far obtained from the family, and I will speak more decidedly."

"But I have no particulars, as yet, beyond what I have given you; and they came second-hand from the chief."

"Ah!"

A sudden thought seemed to strike the detective.

"I'll tell you what it is, Niel," said he. "I was on my way to make my first inquiries of the family when I chanced to meet you. You shall make the investigation in my stead."

"I?" in undisguised astonishment or perturbation, it was hard to tell which.

"Certainly; and why not?"

"Could you trust me in a wealthy house? Do you forget that I am an ex-thief?"

This was an evasion, though Westcott did not perceive it as such.

"I remember what I choose," he returned, a little impatiently, "and I would trust you anywhere."

"Thank you—from the bottom of my heart, Mr. Westcott!"

"Nonsense! Will you go in my place?"

"In your company?"

"No; alone. That would be best."

"To what special purpose?"

"That you may judge whether the Rook was concerned in the robbery of the will, or not."

"And then?"

"And in that way let me know if I can depend upon the full zeal of your assistance, or not. There is big money, Niel—money for both of us—in this thing, if prosecuted successfully."

The other made a half-angry gesture.

"You ought to know that money would be no object to me, in running the Rook or one of the gang to earth!"

"Pardon me! I had forgotten. Will you go?"

"Yes."

The detective rose with a satisfied expression in his stern face.

"You will stay to supper with me?" asked MacWalters.

"No; my wife will be expecting me. Here," tendering a card, that was listlessly taken, "is the Carlingford address. You will doubtless find your visit anxiously looked for, and will explain that you are sent by me, with my fullest confidence. I shall await your report with the utmost interest. The robbery was perpetrated last night. Good-evening and good luck!" And the detective hurried away.

Niel MacWalters, left to himself, remained for some moments in profound thought.

Then, abruptly rousing from his reverie, he struck a light, and proceeding to a cheap dressing-case near at hand, studied the reflection of his face in its looking-glass.

It was a dark, a strong and a handsome face, upon which the heavy mustache, the lines of thought and suffering beyond its years, and a growing pallor of mingled sadness and resolution of late, had impressed a somewhat new air of mystery and depth.

"Would my identity be likely to be fathomed amid these furrowing outlines, even by kindly woman-eyes, after all these years?" murmured the young man to himself. "Who knows? However, best to take no chances."

He opened the drawer, made a selection from the miscellaneous articles for facial disguise which it contained, and then set off his mustache with an aristocratic-looking false imperial, which altered and foreignized his appearance not a little.

Satisfied with the change, he began to busy himself with the preparations for supper, and was thus engaged when the fictitious newsboy came bounding back into the room.

"Any news?" demanded Niel. "But I see there is by your face and eyes. Resume your appropriate personality, Eva—you know how I hate to see you in any other—and then you can give me your budget while you are setting the table."

The order was cheerfully obeyed.

"News? Why, there was no end of it in Growler Alley, papa!" exclaimed Eva, upon making her reappearance from an adjoining room. "The scum-hole was fairly boiling over."

"No novelty in that. But let me have the particulars, my dear."

"Kitty Floss is nabbed for lifting again; Bob Mint brought a black eye from a poor shy * at a gentleman's ticker † in a Broadway stuffer; ‡ and Blotchy has once more been half-pounded to death by Crachitt."

"So! Still the same old seething, with hardly a change."

"The Rook has sent out notice to be ready for a thorough shaking-up by the cops, in view of some big up-town job. All the Corners are agog over it."

Niel pricked up his ears. Might the warning have some reference to the Carlingford will-robbery?

"That is better," said he. "You can tell me the rest while we dispose of our supper, pet. After that, I must leave you alone for a while."

"All right, Papa Niel. The small revolver is under my pillow, and I'm never afraid. I'll make the tea."

Eva was, indeed, brave, as MacWalters well knew—in fact, she might, without exaggeration, be said to be absolutely insensible to fear—and one of her best characteristics was that she seldom asked questions of her protector for information that was not volunteered.

Supper at an end, he simply kissed her and departed, after saying that he would return as early as might be.

MacWalters was not insensible to the host of bitter enmities he had already created among the desperate criminal gang to which he had once belonged, and he was ever on the alert for an unexpected assault.

His footfalls after dark were like a cat's, his eyes like a lynx's and everywhere at once, and his egress from any place into the open night-air was ever with a swift, noiseless, gliding unexpectedness for which the shrewdest of the mischievously-inclined could have but little preparation.

However, in the realm of vice there are others as wary, as cat-footed and as lynx-eyed as the avenging sleuth-hound that would track them down.

On this occasion, hardly had MacWalters noiselessly issued into the gathering dusk, and closed the door behind him, before he was suddenly and murderously set upon by three men, with masked faces, who seemed to have risen out of the very ground.

Without the slightest exclamation, he backed against the house-wall, and, knife in hand, began coolly to play them for all they were worth.

CHAPTER VII.

THE STOLEN WILL.

ONE of MacWalters's assailants was armed with a dagger, the two others with bludgeons.

* *Shy*, attempt. † *Ticker*, watch. ‡ *Stuffer*, horse-car.

But, Niel was such a skillful all-around fighter, and, with his back to the wall, he had no difficulty in evading their combined attack, while effecting some execution on his own part.

In a few minutes one of the club-wielders was doubled up and sent staggering back under a tremendous kick in the stomach, the other one simultaneously caught an ugly slash in the forearm, which caused him to drop his stick with an oath, while a flush fist-blow, cleverly delivered, took the man with the dagger in the throat and sent him reeling.

Just prior to their all taking to ignominious flight, however, the latter essayed a last attempt by springing forward with lightning-like rapidity—he was a tall, slender, athletic fellow—and upraised knife.

But swifter, cleverer, more formidable yet was the counter-movement on the part of MacWalters.

The knife flew from the rascal's grip, another left-hander sent him spinning, and, ere he could quite take to his legs, his close-buttoned Prince Albert coat was torn open, to the momentary (but all-sufficient, in Niel's case) revelation of a curiously costly scarf-pin, in the shape of a large ruby-crusted crescent conjoined with a diamond solitaire as a star-drop.

"I shall know that again on occasion," thought MacWalters; and then, as the ruffian followed his fleeing companions, he picked up and examined the fallen poniard.

This also was of curious workmanship—a Malay creese, in fact, with delicate, waving blade, and a richly-embossed silver hilt, containing in its head a deep-set, magnificent topaz.

"So; a fitting companion, as a remembrancer, for the scarf-pin of its owner!" And the dagger was forthwith appropriated.

The street had been temporarily deserted, and the struggle at the distillery door had been so noiseless as to attract no attention.

But at the next street-corner MacWalters saw Silas Wiener approaching him from a low groggery opposite, with what seemed to be a more hang-dog cheerfulness than was his wont.

"Did you have aught to do with the attack just made upon me back yonder?" queried the young man, sternly. "But you needn't answer—I see that you didn't." With a gesture repressive of a flood of wondering protests about to burst forth. "But, tell me this: Were you aware beforehand of the intention to attack me?"

"Of course I was," was the suavely frank reply. "What is there in Paradise Corners that Silas Wiener doesn't catch on to, my dear sir?" With a self-satisfied smirk.

"Why did you not warn me?"

"Dear, dear, dear! Do you forget so soon what I have so often declared as my first principles, my dear Mr. MacWalters? You hadn't paid me for any service beyond my last performance in your interest, and—"

"Which is equivalent to saying that my intending murderers *did* pay for your silence and non-action in advance?"

Silas placed his hand on the threadbare covering of the spot where his heart was supposed to be, and bowed elaborately.

"My dear sir, how often, how very often, have I announced, with the child-like candor that is one of the most charming characteristics of my ingenuous nature that, while I professed to be constantly up for the highest bidder, with gratuitous services owing to no man—"

He was interrupted by the other clutching him unceremoniously by the throat and jerking him to his knees.

"Reptile!" hissed MacWalters, "I have spared you the knowledge thus far, but your loathsomeness is a rebuke to my forbearance. Know this at last: A whisper of mine could hang you, if I so willed it!"

The knave's blotched face grew livid, and he trembled like a leaf.

"Hark you, creeping parody upon unblushing, self-declared iniquity, as you would imagine yourself to be!" the other went on, mercilessly.

"The little billiard-marker who was assassinated last summer for his paltry winnings on the river pier, under which a branch of the Rook's gang make their den—whose very body was afterward stolen from its consecrated resting-place for the price it would fetch at the dissecting-table! Who was the principal in the dastard double crime?"

"Mercy, mercy!" whined the miserable suppliant. "Dear Mr. MacWalters, if you only knew the high, the purely personal regard I have for you!"

He got up, dusting his knees philosophically, after Niel had cast him to one side with a shuddering gesture.

"Believe me, Mr. Mac," he went on, with his accustomed suavity and impudence. "I am henceforth yours truly. But, alas! genius is not always fitly rewarded, my dear sir, and I am unfortunately a needy poet, an impecunious philosopher—in other words, a poor man. Am I to understand that I am henceforth to work without hope of remuneration?"

"No," gruffly, "you'll be paid as heretofore. But remember!"

"Ah, my dear sir, believe me, my memory is

peculiarly, I may say brilliantly, tenacious upon certain vital points!"

"Enough! What wind had you of the intended attack?"

"I pretended to be snoozing, and overheard them discussing it over yonder in Denny's private drinking-room," indicating the liquor-store opposite.

"Who were the men?"

"Two of them were Big Peters and Biter Magee, of the Rook's gang."

"I suspected it. And the third?"

"The swell with the crescent-spark on his neckercher?"

"Yes."

"His face was so fash with the bristlers I could make nothing of it."

"What did you overhear of the object of the contemplated attack upon me?"

"Only these words, spoken by the stranger: 'The Rook, your mysterious master and my particular friend, is more than ever anxious to do for the gang's sworn enemy now, lest he should be taken on by the peelers in a will case in which we are particularly interested.'"

MacWalters started.

"That will do," said he. "Shadow Peters and Magee, and find out what other deviltry they may be up to."

He dropped a coin into Wiener's hand, and hurried away.

Taking the Elevated Railroad for 125th street, and proceeding thence to the Carlingford residence—a fine double house, fronting Mt. Morris Park—in half an hour MacWalters was in the presence of Mrs. and Miss Carlingford, to whom he made known the object of his visit and what he already knew of the case, with the modesty that was not without an agreeable effect.

"We had word, sir, from Headquarters that Detective Westcott would visit us this evening," said Mrs. Carlingford, an aristocratic, careworn-looking lady of fifty, with kindly eyes and a sweet voice. "Are you his assistant?"

"Rather an expert, ma'am, in whom he is good enough to place much confidence, and his representative for this occasion."

"Your name, if you please?"

"MacWalters, at your service, ma'am."

The lady looked interested, and then smiled—a very sad smile was this lady's.

"It's an odd coincidence," said she. "That chances to have been my maiden name—a Scotch one in my case."

"An odd coincidence indeed," murmured the visitor, casting down his eyes; "as I also chance to be of Scottish descent—on one side."

At the same time he took in his elegant, refined surroundings (they were in a superbly-appointed reception-room) with a covert and uneasy glance.

"What right have I to be seated in such a place, in familiar converse with these cultivated, beautiful creatures?" he thought, with indescribable bitterness; "I, the ex-crook, the reformed criminal, but so shortly ago the occupant of a well-deserved prison-cell!"

At this juncture Miss Carlingford—a singularly handsome and pleasing brunette of twenty-one or two—interposed to say:

"Mamma, perhaps the gentleman's time is valuable, and we had better facilitate his investigation of the robbery with as little delay as possible."

The mother inclined her head, and MacWalters could not abstain from shooting a grateful glance in the last speaker's direction, she had called him a gentleman with such perfect unconsciousness.

"I have already explained, ladies, what I already know of the inner history of the case, if I may call it such," Niel began, in a business-like way. "Let me first supplement this with a statement in my own behalf, and I shall then proceed with the investigation."

The ladies bowed, and looked becomingly interested.

"Mr. Westcott has chiefly selected me for this duty, in the hope that a certain suspicion of mine may be confirmed, to the effect that the purloiner of the missing will might be a certain noted and most mysterious master criminal of this city, in which event alone could I promise to bend my every effort and my untiring energies to the miscreant's capture."

"How very interesting!" exclaimed Miss Carlingford, while a slightly uneasy look came into the mother's face. "Who is this mysterious master criminal, Mr. MacWalters?"

"It is unknown. Practically, he is an invisibility. Even his followers and minions—he has no associates—have never met or seen him, undisguised, face to face."

"But he must have a name?"

"But one, so far as is known."

"What is that?"

"The Rook—which, in criminal parlance, is synonymous with the—with His Satanic Majesty."

"This is really more romance than we looked for. But in that event—By the way, Mr. MacWalters," with a charming laugh, "I hope you will consider my curiosity as privileged."

"With pleasure, miss."

"Well, then, in the event of your finding your suspicions against Mr. Invisibility well-ground-

ed, why should you then be so profoundly earnest in the desire to hunt him down especially?"

Niel's face darkened.

"Because he is my enemy," he replied, in a low voice—"because I have sworn to hunt him down!"

"No Rook, nor Mr. Invisibility had anything to do with stealing the will," said Mrs. Carlingford, decidedly, quick to perceive that the conversation was having a painful drift. "It was stolen, or procured to be stolen, by my husband's half-brother, Lawyer Jacob Merrydew? Of that I am positive."

"True, true!" murmured the daughter. "It must be so."

"Pardon me," said MacWalters. "I understand the man named to be the family enemy?"

They nodded assent.

"Might he not, then, have procured it to be stolen by the powerful and mysterious criminal I have referred to?"

Yes; they admitted this.

"Pray show me the receptacle from which the will was abstracted," said Niel, rising, "and also the means by which the thief most likely effected an entrance. I shall then be able to form something of an opinion."

They forthwith conducted him to Mr. Carlingford's apartment, a handsome and luxurious back room with bath-room attached, on the second floor.

While entering, MacWalters came to an involuntary pause before a picture on the wall—the portrait of a handsome but willful-looking youth of sixteen or seventeen.

He turned a sort of dazed look of inquiry toward the ladies, who did not seem displeased by his agitation.

"It is the portrait of my missing son—my eldest child," said Mrs. Carlingford, in a low, trembling voice, while averting her gaze. "Your previous knowledge of his history, sir, will warrant my speaking of him. Alas! could he come back to our arms once more, my husband's strength of mind might be restored—there would be no difficulty then as to his making a new will, exactly to replace the one that has been stolen."

Somewhat mystified by her words, the young man seemed to recover from the fascination the portrait had so strangely exerted upon him, and with a grateful inclination of the head, he followed the ladies into the apartment.

CHAPTER VIII.

A PROMISE UNFULFILLED.

THE unfortunate Mr. Miles Carlingford—physically, a hale, hearty-looking gentleman of sixty, but whose mental vacancy was but too apparent—was lying listlessly back in an invalid's chair, being fanned by his male nurse as the visitor was ushered into the apartment.

He turned his unspeculative eyes fitfully toward the group, and then paid them no further attention.

Mrs. Carlingford exhibited a small safe-receptacle set in the masonry of the wall, whose iron door had been forced in order to obtain the will.

She then led Niel into the bath-room, whose single, narrow window, barred with perpendicular iron rods, overlooked a back area, and thence diagonally over a brick wall of the cross-street, at the corner of which the house was situated, and pointed to the manner in which the bars had been broken or bent apart by the burglarious intruder, doubtless after scaling the area-wall, and thence obtaining a footing on a strong leader directly underneath the window-ledge.

MacWalters asked a few questions, and then made an examination of the bars, from which he presently turned to the ladies with a quietly exultant look in his dark face.

"What is it?" they exclaimed, in a breath.

"Have you a clew?"

"A general one."

"What is your opinion?"

"That the theft was the Rook's personal work and none other's!"

At this moment a servant entered, saying to Miss Carlingford, in a low but audible voice, that Mr. Holdover begged to see her in the parlor.

Miss Carlingford, who was deeply interested in the investigation, bit her lip, and seemed about to return an impatient, if not an ungracious rejoinder to the summons, when a look from her mother restrained her and she followed the servant down-stairs, though evidently in anything but the best of humors.

The young man went on to explain to Mrs. Carlingford how certain marks on the window-bars plainly indicated (to him) that a peculiarly-powerful jack had been used in breaking some and prying others apart, such as had never been known to have been used by any other than the mysterious Rook, who indeed was supposed to have partly invented the implement, a specimen of which had once been found abandoned in flight at the scene of an incomplete burglary known, or almost known, to have been his single-handed work.

The lady seemed to take exceptional interest in the handsome, sad young man's low-voiced, and yet animated, manner of explanation.

"Then the Rook, as you call this wonderful criminal," said she, "is not always content, it would appear, to leave his risky enterprises to the industry of his ignorant and obedient satellites, but is sometimes willing to incur the hazard of executing them, unaided, in his own person?"

"It would seem so, ma'am, though in very rare and extra-important instances."

Apparently marveling not a little at her visitor's powers of deduction, Mrs. Carlingford led the way back to the lower floor for further conference.

By inadvertance, she took him into the drawing-room occupied by Miss Carlingford and her visitor—a singularly handsome man, though with an untrustworthy expression, who was quite evidently one of the young lady's suitors, if not altogether a favored one—and then, seeing that it was too late to withdraw without embarrassment, she tactfully bridged the difficulty by introducing the men to one another.

"Mr. Holdover, Mr. MacWalters; Mr. MacWalters, Mr. Asdrubal Holdover."

The last named seemed to put aside a sense of annoyance, and then, with well-bred ease, advanced a step with extended hand.

MacWalters was about to take it when he experienced a sudden thrill, and started back, though recovering himself almost instantly.

"Excuse me, Mr. Asdrubal Holdover," he then said, advancing significantly, to the astonishment and mystification of both mother and daughter, "but I am perfectly fascinated by that scarf-pin you are wearing."

"S-i-r!" and Holdover drew up his tall and slender but athletic frame to its full height.

"Positively fascinated, I assure you. A ruby-crusted crescent, with a diamond star-drop between the tips! Was ever anything more curious?"

"What do you mean, sir?"

"Only this: That I have in my possession an article that would charmingly accompany your scarf-pin, sir, in the way of *bric-a-brac*. It is in the shape of a Malay creese, with a richly embossed silver hilt, and saving a stunning topaz in its head."

Mr. Asdrubal Holdover visibly lost countenance, though he managed to make a few sarcastic remarks to Mrs. Carlingford upon the eccentric breeding of her impertinent visitor, after which he rather precipitately made his adieux.

Miss Carlingford seemed more puzzled than angry at the incident, while her mother was somewhat offended, no less than troubled.

But MacWalters steadfastly evaded any explanation of the scene, while assuring them both that all would ultimately be made clear, and not to his own detriment, either.

In taking his leave, he bowed low before Mrs. Carlingford, and said most impressively:

"Honored madam, believe me, that what I am about to say is in a perfectly disinterested spirit. Have I not understood you to intimate that any great and sudden shock of overwhelming joy might restore your unfortunate husband to mental vigor, so that the lost will might be intelligently duplicated by him within the requirements of the law, thus rendering the present loss of no manner of consequence?"

The lady was both surprised and moved, her daughter in the mean time becoming intensely interested.

"I did intimate that, sir," replied the former. "It is the opinion of my husband's physician, who is also a distinguished alienist."

"Will you suggest the nature of the required joyful shock that would be likely to prove efficacious—give an instance, I mean?"

"Yes, sir; the return of our long-missing son to his father's arms—I can think of nothing so overwhelmingly joyful as that—that is, if William be not already dead," and the lady with difficulty commanded her voice.

"Or a similarly, powerful shock of joy?" suggested the young man.

"Impossible! There is no joy that could approximate to the one I have named."

"But supposing that there were—I beg of you to suppose the case!"

"Very well, sir, I shall do so. In that case, the one would doubtless operate as well as the other."

"Allow me to ask if there is any particular time of the day or night when Mr. Carlingford's faculties appear to be less benumbed than usual—when he would probably be the most susceptible to the joyful shock of which we are speaking?"

"Yes; it has been remarked that at six in the morning, at which hour Mr. Carlingford uniformly rises and is assisted at his bath and toilet by his nurse, his mind is invariably clearer and more active than at any other time. This partial illumination of the faculties generally lasts an hour, and then disappears."

"Very well, madam; with your permission, I shall take the liberty of calling upon Mr. Carlingford to-morrow morning at six o'clock sharp, when I promise to provide the joyous sensation that shall restore him to his mental health and vigor—if it is, indeed, within the power of any sensation on earth to accomplish that."

Both mother and daughter seemed at first un-

able to comprehend the full purport of these astounding words.

Then, in obedience to a common impulse, each seized impetuously upon a hand of the young man.

"Oh, sir!" exclaimed Mrs. Carlingford, the tears streaming down her cheeks; "you know of our long missing son's whereabouts—that is it—and you intend to restore him to us?"

"It must be so!" cried the daughter. "Speak, sir—confess it—and we shall forever bless your name."

MacWalters steeled himself against their entreaties by an agonized effort.

"My promise, remember, only includes a joyful sensation similar to the one you crave," he replied, with forced coldness. "I only bid you to anticipate an unsurpassed sensation—as great and joyful as can possibly be presented."

He then tore himself away, taking his departure most unceremoniously, after a repetition of the terms of his promise.

As he was quitting the house something like a shadowy form stol away, as if there might have been eavesdropping under one of the drawing-room windows, but MacWalters, more powerfully absorbed than his custom, noticed nothing, and hurried away to carry his report to Detective James Westcott.

"But what are you going to do, Niel?" demanded the latter, when he had heard and digested all there was to tell. "How can you fulfill the extraordinary promise that you have made to these ladies?"

"By providing for the unfortunate gentleman the electric delectation as agreed," was the collected reply.

"But you know nothing of the family."

"Don't I?"

The detective gave him a quick, covert look. Could this strangely self-contained young man, whose life had been so dark, whose wrongs had been so deep—this avenging, reformed thief—be the missing William Carlingford, the lost son of the wealthy and aristocratic family in his own person?

A ghost of the idea had once before found form in Westcott's mind, where it now reappeared more substantially, but he dissembled his suspicion all the same.

"Well," said he, "I only hope you may in some way fulfill your promise, Mac. It's a fine beginning you have made for me in the case—a strange story you have brought back with you, including that queer swell of the novel scarf-pin and jeweled dagger—and, as I shall have the opportunity, I don't mind accompanying you to the house to-morrow."

"With all my heart!" said MacWalters. "In fact, that will be best." And they forthwith separated.

But as the two men ascended the stoop of the Harlem palace at the appointed time, it being then scarcely broad daylight, it became evident that some unusual excitement was going on in the interior.

Indeed, scarcely had a scared-looking footman answered the door-bell summons before Miss Carlingford, hastily dressed and with a face of marble, came rushing, or rather tottering, down the stairs to meet them.

"Oh, sir! Oh, Mr. MacWalters!" she gasped; "you are too late—the arch-enemy of our family has been here before you."

"What is it?" exclaimed MacWalters, turning pale.

"My father—my poor father!" her voice rose into a wail.

"Not dead? He is not dead? Do not tell me that!"

"Worse, worse than that! Oh, my God!" she clasped her forehead with both hands. "He has been—murdered!"

Niel turned yet more ghastly, and he staggered back with a hollow groan.

Then, accompanied by Westcott and followed by the rest, he sprang up the stairs.

It was but too true. It was but the inanimate remains of the unfortunate gentleman that were extended upon the luxurious couch, and a gaping wound showed where a knife had been remorselessly driven into his heart.

"God of vengeance!" faltered the horror-stricken MacWalters. "Why did I not speak last night, instead of deferring the joy I had intended for him? Too late! too late!" and he sunk fainting beside the corpse.

CHAPTER IX.

LINK BY LINK.

THE discovery of the murder had first been made, and the household aroused to the terrible fact, some little time before the arrival of MacWalters and the detective.

The first awful shock had therefore had time to expend itself to a certain degree, which only made the horror-smitten, swooning agitation of the young man, reasonably supposed to be little more than an absolute stranger in the bereaved family, yet more noticeable.

It was not a slight faint into which he had fallen, either, but a heavy, paralyzing faint, as if beneath a crushing blow that had stricken hard at the very core of the emotions.

While Westcott, with the assistance of some of the servants, was bringing him out of it, at the

rear of the fatal apartment, the former chanced to notice the portrait of the youth already alluded to as being upon the wall.

He glanced from the portrait to the ex-thief's face, after which an odd look of satisfaction came into his own.

Niel came around presently, and then he was quickly on his feet, with muttered apologies for the unaccountable weakness, and to all appearances thoroughly steeled against the tragic environments whose first impression he had found so appalling.

"How was it effected, Westcott?" and he turned a hardened look of inquiry upon the detective.

The latter pointed through the bath-room door to the broken and bent window-bars, which had not been repaired, and were as much of an explanation of the murderer's as they had been of the will-thief's entrance.

"The Rook! the Rook! only the Rook!" muttered Niel, in the hushed, far-away voice that was occasionally his.

Westcott nodded.

Mrs. Carlingford, who had been carried fainting away from the harrowing scene before the new arrivals, now came hurrying back into the room, accompanied by her daughter and a Miss Liscomb, who was her "companion" and reader.

She was now comparatively composed, though still ghastly, and had evidently been freshly informed by her daughter of Niel's arrival.

"Oh, Mr. MacWalters!" she exclaimed, seizing the young man's hand, "you were too late—too late!"

Niel's composure, though evidently attained only as the result of desperate internal struggles, was now of the cast-iron quality, resembling, indeed, little less than absolute insensibility to surrounding impressions.

"And yet, madam, was I not on time?" he answered, coldly.

"Yes, oh, yes! But were you really bringing with you, sir, the secret joy that was to restore my poor husband to reason?"

"In accordance with my promise, madam."

"Tell me what it was, sir! Oh, do let my daughter and me know what it was you were bringing!"

"I must refuse you, madam. It would no longer avail with him!" and there was a fleeting spasm over his iron-like face as he indicated the now-sheeted body on the couch.

"Ah!" with a renewed wail, after which she urged her strange request afresh.

But MacWalters shook his head.

"Not now—it would not be meet or well," he replied. "Impossible!"

"Let me plead for the secret, too!" and Miss Carlingford took his hand in turn. "Oh, do not refuse us, sir!"

He gazed pityingly into the swimming eyes of the distressed and beautiful girl, but without softening.

"It cannot be!" said he, almost brutally. "What I had to tell would avail nothing now, I tell you!"

She flung aside his hand, her eyes blazing with sudden exasperation.

"Who and what are you?" she cried, "that you should tempt us with joyous promises which only the red hand of murder could annul—that you should afterward swoon away at the side of the poor butchered body in an extremity of emotion, like one privileged in the bosom of our grief and our distraction? Who and what are you, I demand?"

He gave her a hard, unsympathizing look, and then strode to the side of the couch.

"Who and what am I?" he repeated, laying one hand lightly upon the body, and raising the other impressively aloft. "Listen; I am this unfortunate dead man's Avenger—his earthly avenger, until his actual murderer shall expiate the crime within the hangman's throttling noose, and until its fiendish instigator, the family enemy, shall also have been forced to the penalty! Mrs. Martha Carlingford, Miss Maud Carlingford—you, his widow and his orphan—now you know enough of who and what I am!"

He signed to the detective, and together they slipped out of the room.

The throng of frightened servants in the passage, however, slightly impeded their progress, and while pushing by the rear door they overheard Miss Liscomb say softly to her mistress and Miss Carlingford:

"I would really not give that ridiculous young man another thought. His impressive words and manners are merely cheap theatricals, with which to gain your confidence, and ultimately, no doubt, your money."

The men had before this taken note of Miss Liscomb—a small and pale, but prettily formed and rather handsome blonde, somewhat *passee*, with cold eyes and a discontented expression.

"I beg to disagree with you, Miss Liscomb," Mrs. Carlingford's voice was heard to respond, with a certain *hauteur* in its distressed tones.

"I'm sure I do, too!" interposed Miss Carlingford's voice, eagerly. "The young man is both modest and well bred, and, in spite of his mysterious agitation here, I feel an unaccountable attraction for him."

"We shall see," Miss Liscomb was finally heard to say, though with an added caution in her voice. "I only hope I may misjudge him; but—yet more softly and guardedly—" "stranger things have chanced than that he himself should have some sinister connection with these—these awful happenings."

That was all, and the two men exchanged a significant glance as they pushed their way through the corridor, and thence down the stairs.

The police had already been notified, and there was nothing immediately to do but to confer, and for this purpose they strolled through the Park grounds directly opposite.

"What do you think of the 'companion'?" was MacWalters's first query.

"A woman to be watched, feared, and perhaps suspected!" was the prompt response. "A hypocrite, absolute, foul and deadly!"

"Right enough, and not over-strong!"

"What of Miss Carlingford's suitor, Asdrubal Holdover, of whom you have advised me?" was Westcott's query, in its turn.

"Your opinion first, my friend?"

"Well, you are satisfied that he led the mysterious attack upon you last evening, in the Rook's interest?"

"Absolutely. How else explain the silent testimony of the star-crescent scarf-pin and the topaz-headed dagger?"

"True. You have the latter in your possession, you say?"

"Yes."

"Let me look at it."

Niel produced the weapon, which, after a brief examination, was returned to his pocket.

"It is all very remarkable—most remarkable!" observed the detective, thoughtfully. "Are you positive in fixing the actual theft and murder upon the Rook?"

"As a matter of course. Aren't you? You saw the peculiar marks—the Rook's trade-mark, they might be called—on the window-bars?"

"Yes—rather convincing proofs from our professional point of view, it must be confessed. But they would only connect him indubitably with the preliminary and lesser crime—the theft of the will."

"Did you mark the nature of the fatal dagger-thrust?"

"Not particularly. And I shouldn't think you could have done so either—you fainted so suddenly." This with an inquisitive glance, under which however, the other did not wince perceptibly.

"I did mark it, though—at a single comprehensive glance," said Niel. "It is photographed here, in deep-branded characters of fire." And he touched his forehead.

"Well, what of it?"

"It was the Rook's murder-thrust—the Rook's own! I cannot describe its peculiarities understandingly, but they were there just the same."

"Mac, if you are not carried away by your flights of fancy, you are an analytical genius that Edgar Allan Poe would have rejoiced to characterize."

"Are my words, looks or actions, Westcott, over the indications of a flighty man?"

"Candidly, no."

"Do you remember the murder—still a mystery—of the Morrisania miser, two years ago?"

"Of course."

"And of the captain of the West Indiaman—equally enigmatical—a few months later?"

"Certainly."

"And that both, in police and criminal circles, were whisperingly attributed to the Rook—then thought by the majority to be nothing more than a myth?"

"I do not forget."

"Well, the fatal single thrust in each instance was the exact counterpart, marked by the identical peculiarities, as that which let out the life of our unfortunate gentleman across the way—the Rook's own!"

The detective grasped his companion by the hand.

"I give in to you, Mac!" said he. "The Rook's work, both theft and murder! We'll let it stand at that."

"Good! Now go on with your theorizing."

"I shall do so. My present theory, then, makes the Rook as the principal, or at least the active instrument, in these crimes, with Lawyer Jacob Merrydew, the envious half-brother, this man of the star-crescent scarf-pin and the topaz dagger, Asdrubal Holdover, and—perhaps—Miss Liscomb, as the accessories."

"Capital! Now, your opinion of Mr. Holdover, individually?"

"I shall form that better, after having seen the man."

MacWalters laid his hand on the other's arm, with a start.

"Talk of the devil—you know the rest," he muttered. "He is approaching us this moment—the very man!"

Detective Westcott looked up expectantly.

CHAPTER X.

ONE CLEW, AT LEAST—A STARTLING INCIDENT.

It was really the man Holdover, who was descending one of the steep paths that lead windingly down from the top of the steep and lofty

escarpment rising from the center of Mount Morris Square, and which, indeed, gives that limited but pretty New York pleasure-ground its name.

The early March morning had turned balmy and sweet, with suggestive premonitions of the approaching maidenhood of the year. And the man was strolling leisurely in a meditative mood, in somewhat striking contrast with his fashionable attire and rather stylish good looks, his slender cane swinging idly from side to side, his chin upon his breast.

As he looked up and recognized his impertinent questioner of the preceding evening, a sudden scowl crossed his otherwise rather prepossessing florid face.

It was instantly dissipated, however, and he took the initiative by advancing with a winning smile.

"Ah, it's you again, Mr. MacWalters," said he. "I hope you are finding yourself in a more civil humor than upon our first meeting at Mrs. Carlingford's."

"I presume you mean our first introduction, Mr. Holdover," returned Niel, steadily. "That was our second meeting."

"Still a little off, eh? Allow me to forego the fathoming of your meaning—you are altogether too abstruse."

"Allow me to particularize, then. Our first meeting was an hour previous to the formal introduction you allude to, Mr. Holdover. It was characterized by a murderous personal attack, which you led upon me, and was signalized no less by the peculiar scarf-pin which you still have the effrontery to wear than by this!"

And MacWalters displayed the Malay creese, causing its topaz hilt setting to sparkle in the sunlight.

If Holdover was a scoundrel, he was also a thoroughbred.

With a wearied, "Oh-there-you-go-again!" sort of gesture, he bent forward to examine the handsome weapon with a surprised and admiring curiosity that was a master-piece of pure dissembling, if dissembling it really was.

"A beautiful specimen of oriental silver-chasing!" he exclaimed. "Sir, if your words are a trifle insane, your judgment as an art-collector is none the less to be commended."

Feeling that he was being vanquished on his own ground, MacWalters angrily put the weapon out of sight.

"Mr. Holdover," he growled, "let me introduce my friend—Mr. James Westcott of the Central Office detective force."

But even this last shot was of no avail.

Mr. Asdrubal Holdover merely raised his hat a little sarcastically, as if mentally pitying the detective upon his companion's aberration.

MacWalters was in danger of wholly losing his temper.

"What is your latest news of the Carlingford household?" he gruffly demanded.

"I might better ask the question of you, my dear sir," returned the other, with imperturbable good-humor. "You outlasted me there last evening, if you will remember."

"We are just now from there."

"Ah!" with a most natural elevation of the brows; "so early? You are already ahead of me in the privileges."

"Man! man! don't you know that Mr. Miles Carlingford was this morning found dead—murdered in his bed?"

Holdover staggered back, as if shot, his eyes glaring, his entire demeanor suggestive of the most complete panic and horror.

"Good God! you don't mean it?" he gasped. "Oh! you would not dare to venture upon such a jest?"

If the man was acting, even MacWalters was compelled to succumb to its perfection—at least for the moment.

"I speak nothing but the truth, sir," said he, less harshly. "Would that it were otherwise!"

Holdover had grown livid. His whole frame seemed shaken, and, taking off his hat, he wiped away the perspiration, which had started upon his brow in big clammy beads, with a trembling hand.

"I can't believe it!" he cried, wildly. "I sha'n't believe it! Maud's father—the poor imbecile gentleman—heavens! it is too horrible!"

And he sped away through the Park, over grass-plots and *parterres*, in a bee-line for the scene of the tragedy.

The detective and the avenger stood eying each other with questioning looks for some seconds in silence.

"Well, what do you think of him?" inquired the latter at last.

"This," replied Westcott, who had wasted not an instant in his scrutiny of the man in question: "That if your Asdrubal Holdover is cognizant of, or in the remotest degree concerned in, these crimes he is the most accomplished actor and superb dissembler that I ever saw, read, heard or dreamed of! A prodigy, sir—nothing less than a prodigy!"

"I can't but agree with you," admitted MacWalters, sullenly. "However— But, hallo! the fellow must have dropped that out of his hat."

He had suddenly descried a letter lying on the path, and at once pounced upon it.

The envelope bore Holdover's address in a woman's delicate handwriting, but this did not deter the counterplotting pair from plunging unceremoniously into its contents—few men being over-scrupulous when tracking a foul crime to its secret source.

It was a love-letter, bearing the signature, "I. L."

It was full of passionate protestations of devotion on the part of the writer, mingled with not a few reproaches and complaints, in which there was more than one jealous allusion to "that gilt-edged, haughty minx, 'M. C.," and closing with these significant words:

"You may think you can keep up this double game, Asdrubal, with success to yourself. Of course I allude to your secret intimacy with J. M., while making love to M. C., and pretending to have the family interest singly at heart. But I warn you solemnly that, consummate actor as you are, and *à l'œuvre* or *no will*, that you must slip up in the end, with ruin for yourself and perhaps disgrace for me—which I, for one, cannot contemplate with equanimity. Let me once more entreat you, and no longer in vain, to do the proper and manly thing. That is, break off at once with M. C., (who has no love for you, as you must long ago have perceived, unless hopelessly blinded by your *amour propre*), strike hands for good or ill with J. M., for a big share of what he may make out of the estate, and make me, your own I. L., your wife, in accordance with your oft-repeated, oft-broken promises, or, through very shame, I may grow desperate, and perhaps dangerous. At all events, I shall not much longer remain as your secret spy in this household, the imbecile head of which is, as you have vaguely hinted to me, no less than doomed. Yours anxiously, etc."

Detective James Westcott was little given to demonstrativeness, but after mastering the contents of the letter conjointly with his companion, he nevertheless slapped his thigh vigorously.

"Was ever such a find?" he exclaimed, exultantly. "Why, it's little short of a guide-post!"

"We are very fortunate," said MacWalters, more moderately.

"I should say so. Now let us see if we agree as to the proffered points. What do the writer's initials, 'I. L.,' stand for?"

"Isabella Liscomb."

"Right—that is, presumably. But how do you substantiate the 'Isabella'?"

"I overheard her mistress address her as 'Bella' when they first entered the room together."

"Good! good! And 'the gilt-edged, haughty minx M. C.'?"

"Miss Maud Carlingford, the daughter of the house."

"Right! And 'J. M.'?"

"Jacob Merrydew, the family foe."

"Right! right! Better and better! So, Mr. Asdrubal Holdover, your fine acting was thrown away upon us, masterpiece as it was in its way! And the detective carefully refolded the tell-tale letter, and put it away in his breast-pocket.

"What immediate action do you advise, Westcott?"

"I'll tell you. Let me see, neither of us have breakfasted yet."

"I have not."

"Nor I. Let us do so at once—and separately. Then I will remain here about the house, picking up what I can, while you see what you can make out of Mr. Lawyer Jacob Merrydew, as a starter."

"Agreed!" exclaimed MacWalters. "To carry him the tragic news will sufficiently excuse the visit. *Au revoir!* Will see you next at the Carlingford house of gloom."

"But where are you off to?" demanded Westcott, in surprise.

Instead of separating from the detective to go down-townward, the avenger had turned up the climbing path at the bottom of which they had been standing.

"I will tell you. The benches on the top of the mount I have often noticed as a favorite resort for park-loungers with newspapers and letters that they seem anxious to read and digest in private. It has occurred to me that our Asdrubal may have left some other piece of writing thereabouts inadvertently."

"I understand. Happy thought!" And, with a wave of the hand, Westcott turned on his heel.

At this juncture a poor little lost puppy dog ran out of some bushes, and whimperingly crossed MacWalters's path.

Love for animals was one of the kindlinesses ingrained into the young man's world-hardened nature.

Instinctively, and without thinking of what disposition he would make of it, MacWalters took up the little creature, and, after snugly stowing it in the breast of his coat, continued on up the steep, winding path.

At the second turn midway up the mount, he came upon one of those natural grotto-like seats that indent the rising inner sides of these paths.

A miserably ragged old woman, bent nearly double, with her head on her breast and her hand mutely extended, palm uppermost on her knee, occupied the seat.

Niel dropped several pennies into the palm, and passed leisurely on.

In an instant, however, the bent form had started noiselessly erect, the bleary eyes blazed

with demoniac animosity, a bared arm—not shriveled or withered, but spare with corded muscle and masculine bone—whose hand grasped a short, heavy knife, was shaken exultingly aloft, and then the disguised ruffian had sprung stealthily upon his unsuspecting prey.

The blow fell, after being reached over the shoulder from behind with lightning-like deadliness and precision.

A great jet of blood spouted up from the victim's breast, and, as he reeled back with a shout, the petticoated assassin sprung up the steep, like a mountain-goat, with a fierce, hoarse laugh.

"The Rook!" yelled MacWalters, still staggering under the shock. "'Tis he! 'tis he!"

"I know it," responded a voice. "I saw it all!" And Westcott flashed by in hot pursuit up the steep.

A moment later he was followed by MacWalters himself, after he had torn from his bosom the carcass of the puppy-dog, which had alone received the actual dagger-thrust, to the preservation of the intended victim's life.

But the murderous scoundrel had disappeared as indubitably as if the face of the hill had opened and shut in his behalf.

After a fruitless, exasperating search, the two pursuers met again on the summit, where Niel explained the remarkable interposition to which he owed his life; and once more they stood questioning each other with grim and startled looks.

CHAPTER XI.

MR. MERRYDEW.

"I LINGERED down below there, I scarcely know why, watching you ascend the path," said the detective, at last, "or I should not have witnessed what I did. By the Lord, my boy, I thought you were done for!"

"I thought so myself, the mere blunt force of the blow was so great." And Niel looked down rather ruefully over his blood-stained and pierced coat. "It will necessitate my return home first. However, Eva will be thankful for that, as I did not tell her that I would not be back for breakfast. Well, we will try to separate again, Westcott, and you can thank your stars for one privilege that mighty few persons have knowingly obtained."

"I understand—a glimpse of the mysterious and redoubtable Rook, though in the oddest of disguises."

"That is it."

The detective nodded thoughtfully, and they walked away together, not separating again until outside the Park, on the busy street.

Mr. Jacob Merrydew, attorney-at-law, had his office—a mere musty den, littered with books, papers and a few sticks of furniture—at the top of a lofty and somewhat old building in Wall street.

When Niel knocked at its door, at about ten o'clock of that morning, a rather lazy voice bade him enter.

Mr. Merrydew was not bending, with pursed brows and avaricious eyes, over his desk, as might have been expected, and MacWalters was not a little surprised at the manner of man revealed.

He was a thin, powerful, apparently ease-loving man of between forty-five and fifty, with a strong, dark, by no means forbidding face at first sight, whose most striking characteristics were a hooked nose, a strong chin, massive jaws, a pair of piercing eyes of different colors, one being black, the other green, and a strange shifting expression of the large, strong and sensuous mouth.

He wore no beard, his curling dark hair was carefully barbered, and his dress was rather that of a fashionable but somewhat dilapidated man-about-town than of a man of business.

He was carelessly reclining upon a rickety lounge, ruthlessly crushing out of shape any number of manuscripts and dog-eared volumes in the act, and engaged in the intellectual occupation of peeling and eating bananas, a considerable bunch of the fruit lying on the floor at his side.

He shot but one glance at his visitor out of his mismatched eyes (but that was a sufficient evidence of the slumbering energy and power in the man), and then nodded good-naturedly.

"Take a seat, sir—that is, if you can find one," said he, and the voice was full and melodious. "A beastly den, this, though I'm sort of used to it. What can I do for you? You're not on law business, I hope?"

MacWalters replied in the negative, and Mr. Merrydew laughed his satisfaction—a lazy, easeful, perfectly selfish laugh, as thoroughly in keeping with the man's external suggestiveness as a cat's purr with her claws and sleekness.

"I am deuced glad of that," continued this strange limb of the law that he made no secret of cordially detesting. "Law business be hanged! It is an infernal bore. I merely hang out my shingle here as a sort of hollow mockery, you know, or a mere excuse for being lazy."

MacWalters was puzzled. He was anxious to know if this languid frankness was real or pretended.

"But do you make no pretense of attending to

business, Mr. Merrydew?" he asked, not unwilling to prolong an interview that facilitated his study of the man.

Mr. Merrydew laughed again.

"Yes—a pretense, and that is about all, though I can have my eyes open to the main chance on occasion. By the way, sir, your name, if you please."

"MacWalters—Niel MacWalters."

Mr. Merrydew smiled—a strange smile, which for the first time indicated something inscrutable in his make-up.

"Ah! Well, you needn't state your business, as I am confident that I couldn't transact it, and would consequently only be bored. If you are sent by any one, and will kindly state by whom, it will answer."

Here he kicked off one of his aristocratic boots which seemed to be pinching him, and, having exhausted his stock of bananas, produced a little paper horn full of gum-drops, with which he proceeded to regale himself as languidly as before, and with the slow, sentimental enjoyment of a school-girl.

Niel had had time for reflection, and he answered, with an assumption of diffidence, that he was from Mrs. Carlingford.

Mr. Merrydew scowled, smiled (though there was something takingly un hypocritical in his very scowl), and then, settling himself back even more luxuriously, he burst into a fit of hearty, boyish, ringing laughter that would have been good for the ear-ache.

"Ha, ha, ha!" he cried. "Oh, hang it all! why should I care whether those good people misjudge me so idiotically or not? How is Martha, anyway?"

MacWalters replied, rather freezingly, that he had not left the lady in an amiable state of health.

"And Maudie, too!" went on the other between his gum-drops. "But of course she's blooming. The dear, handsome girl! Without exception, she was the prettiest creature, as a kid, you know, that I ever clapped my eyes on. But it's all a mistake—a big, blundering mistake! I say, have a gum-drop—do! No! Good thing after too much champagne over night. Yes, all a mistake—a misconception—a prejudice; and all on the stiff-necked Carlingford side."

His thick lips half-pouted, and he assumed an injured air.

"Now I appeal to you, Mr.—ah!—MacWalters. Do I look like a deep, designing, undermining, covetous and generally damnable villain, capable of systematically wrecking the peace of my half-brother's family—if I am poor, somewhat loose-principled, and a spendthrift-rake, which I candidly confess myself to be?"

Candor, no less than a sort of compulsory politeness, caused the visitor to mumble a negative reply.

"By Jupiter! it does me good to hear you admit that—you, a disinterested party. And yet they will have it so, those Carlingfords! By the way, Mr. MacWalters, I also confess to being something of a first-class hypocrite in my way. You must think it odd for a happy-go-lucky chap like me even to have such a dusty, musty, fusty hole as this even to loaf in. A mere pretense, my boy—a mask—a business blind! See that little door over there?"

Niel had just remarked the door, and no more, it was so insignificant—probably leading into a wash-room or coal-bin—and he nodded.

"Open it, and take a peep within. It will afford you a better idea of the sort of rascal I am than if I would lie here and chatter for a week."

The young man obeyed.

The result was an unlooked-for revelation. The interior revealed was that of a spacious and magnificent apartment.

It was like the boudoir of a princess of luxurious tastes, unlimited means and a royal independence as to private morals, and yet with an unmistakably masculine air over all.

A bath, a boudoir and a bedroom in one, superbly appointed, and with pictures and statues that would have caused each particular hair on Anthony Constock's head to stand on end like quills upon the fretful porcupine. A sybarite's retreat, a scoundrel's inner life, or a Sardanapalus's Sanctum Sanctorum, as you might choose to characterize it.

While Niel was gazing wonderstruck into this unexpected lap of luxury, there was the sharp crack of a pistol behind him.

He turned with a lightning-like movement, but only to meet with a second agreeable disappointment.

It was only Mr. Merrydew—who had produced a small revolver, without materially altering his lazy attitude—shooting at mice.

"Remain where you are—don't move!" he cautioned, smiling gleefully. "I may get another shot or two. The pestilent little blackguards cause me no end of annoyance, and—Sshh!"

A tiny rodent was just showing his head at a distant cranny. Crack! went the weapon on the instant, and the mouse was cleverly decapitated.

None other putting in an appearance, after several minutes' patient waiting, Mr. Merrydew slipped the revolver under the lounge with

a little sigh, while MacWalters returned to his seat.

"It's infernally stupid to have nothing to do," said he, rising reluctantly and stretching himself, "when one is too poor to gamble, can't afford to get drunk, and the racing season is still in the dim perspective. Heigh-bo!"

He opened a deep drawer at the bottom of a dilapidated old escritoire, which proved to be a sort of bin apparently filled with sawdust.

But out of it he took a couple of delicate glasses, which he set on an adjoining desk, after carefully wiping them with the skirt-tip of his flower-embroidered silk dressing-gown; and then, producing a bottle of champagne, he dexterously knocked off the neck of it, and brimmed the glasses.

"Not drink?" he exclaimed, in genuine amazement at Niel's firm refusal to partake. "But it's dry wine, man; I wouldn't commit the betise of offering you sweet at this hour of the day."

Then, as the wine was still declined, he shrugged his shoulders, and, carelessly seating himself, proceeded to drink the wine himself.

As he did so, his face assumed a discontented and hard expression.

"I say, Mr. MacWalters," he drawled out, "I don't like it for a man to refuse to drink with me. Honest liquor is a good thing, and there's something wrong about the man who won't get drunk on occasion."

"I beg to disagree with you, Mr. Merrydew."

"Oh, but I am going to prove it and my democratic disposition at the same time, by getting even with you. Why, my dear fellow, I knew you for an ex-thief and post-prison-graduate the instant I set eyes on you!"

MacWalters colored to the roots of his hair, and then became pale as death, though more sorrowful than discomposed.

Who was this man, with the manners of a voluptuary, the frankness of a boy, the eye of a lynx and the cynicism of a serpent?

"You have judged aright, sir," said the young man, quietly. "I am all that you charge. But my most poignant pang is that you should guess it at a glance. What refuge from constant detection can I hope for hereafter?"

CHAPTER XII.

THE BOOK AGAIN.

A SORT of kindness, and even sympathy, seemed to come into Mr. Merrydew's face.

"Pshaw! don't think it," said he. "I didn't judge you at a glance, at all, and neither could any one else, I am sure. I was one of a party of visitors—the guest of a sort of visiting committee, you understand—at the Penitentiary, when you were there, and I have an unfortunate faculty of never forgetting a face. No one in the world would ever take you for other than the good-looking, gentlemanly-appearing fellow that you are. My revenge in calling up such a humiliation was both thoughtless and brutal. I offer you an apology, as between man and man. By Jove! if you should even want to borrow some money, I would try to raise it for you on the spot. I say, do forgive me, won't you?"

He extended his hand, with an enchanting ingenuousness that MacWalters could not but respond to, at least in a measure.

"Mr. Merrydew," he blurted out, impulsively "I, on my part, have been somewhat hypocritical since my entrance here. Your style, manner and appearance took me completely by surprise, which is my only excuse."

"Hallo! what's all this? Never too late to mend, though, and an open confession is good for the soul? What the deuce did you come for, any way?"

"To communicate a piece of tragic news, and see how you would take it."

Mr. Merrydew seemed to turn pale—it is necessary to qualify his demonstrativeness in this way, by reason of the uncertainty of his facial expression.

"Tragic news!" he repeated.

"Yes."

"Don't dally or temporize, if you please. I'm not a baby."

"Your half-brother, Mr. Carlingford, was found this morning, mysteriously murdered in his bed."

A startled, shocked look seemed to come into Mr. Merrydew's face.

His reception of the tragic intelligence was altogether different from the violence that had distinguished Holdover's emotion. It seemed much more subdued and refined, no less than heartfelt, which caused it to impress his visitor more deeply; and in just that proportion was his acting, if acting it really were, so much nearer to perfection.

His face softened, and he passed his hand but once, seemingly with a simple involuntariness, over his eyes.

"Dead! murdered!" he said, half to himself. "Oh, Lord! how a thing like this softens old scores and hard wrinkles! Poor Miles! poor old boy! So hard, too, after all these years of a sort of death in life. It doesn't seem the fair

thing"—with a harsh, mutinous oath—"no, by Jove, it doesn't!"

After a few moments he appeared to collect himself, and begged to be told the particulars.

These were given, no less than the account of the stolen will.

"I am all amazement," said Mr. Merrydew, "and also not a little embarrassed. You see, I can't in conscience go up to the house. They hate me like the deuce—both Martha and the girl—think me a perfect fiend! What's to be done?"

Niel intimated that a visit was scarcely expected from Mr. Merrydew.

"By the way," the latter went on, thoughtfully, "you spoke of fetching me the news in order to see how I would take it. That's odd."

MacWalters did not reply.

"Why, how the deuce should I take it, except just as I have done? Could they have expected me to beat out my brains in a fit of remorse, or to have danced a hornpipe of joy, I wonder?"

Niel still remained silent; in fact, he was growing not a little shamefaced and uncomfortable.

Suddenly a terrible suspicion seemed to strike Mr. Merrydew.

"Good God!" he exclaimed, starting to his feet with frightful energy; "it can't be possible that they suspect me—not of the murder—that would be too preposterous, too outrageous—but of this will-stealing business?"

MacWalters persisted in remaining reticent.

"You do not answer, sir. Speak!" sternly. "If I am to know the worst, let me have it without delay and without evasion, that I may face the enormity and bear it like a man!"

No answer yet.

"Oh, why do you not speak?" in a tone of anguish. "To the deuce with the missing will, whose vaguest purport I cannot imagine! Let us suppose some faint grounds for this abominable suspicion—which I cannot but see by your silence is cherished against me. What object on earth could I have in stealing or destroying my half-brother's will?"

"I only know what I am told, sir," said MacWalters, cautiously breaking silence at last. "It is said that you would have much to gain by there being no will left."

"In what manner? Explain! explain!"

"Because in that case, by previous testamentary provision on the part of your own and Mr. Carlingford's mother, you would come into a moiety of the estate, which is now, or has heretofore been, subject to the payment of a comparatively small income in your behalf."

Mr. Merrydew gave a prolonged whistle, and elevated his eyebrows to their fullest extent.

"Gad! come to think of it, I believe that is so, though it had entirely slipped my memory. By Mars!" slapping his thigh, "in that case, I cannot but honestly rejoice at the absence of a will, nor can you blame me for it. Can you now? Be equally frank with me, and tell me."

The naturalness of all this seemed so perfect as almost to knock away the underpinning of MacWalters's last lingering doubt as to the man's sincerity.

He again took refuge in silence.

Mr. Merrydew gave him a curious look, lighted a fragrant Havana, after fruitlessly offering his visitor a selection from his cigar-case, and then, knitting his brows, seemed to be thinking hard.

Suddenly another and even more startling impression seemed to seize him. He made an impatient gesture, as if to cast it aside as being too absurd for serious consideration, but not altogether successfully.

At last he looked up, a sneer in his varicolored eyes, his florid face drawn and hardened.

"You said that the murder was a mystery," he observed, shortly. "Does suspicion fasten upon no one for that crime, then?"

"Upon no one as the actual perpetrator—that is, not decidedly."

"Go on, I beg of you! I am prepared for anything now," with an appearance of desperately forced calmness. "Don't spare me. The last prize-fight broke me by going the wrong way—I haven't got a cent to prosecute with, in case of a libelous charge, however degrading. Am I suspected of being concerned in the murder, directly or indirectly, or am I not?"

This was too much for Niel, who forthwith arose and took his hat.

"Sir," said he, "I have been received by you with a consideration and courtesy utterly beyond what I had a right to anticipate. For this reason I decline to answer your point-blank question. Let others do it, but I'll be hanged if I shall!"

Mr. Merrydew also arose, with frigid politeness, to bow him out.

"What an infernal jackass I am!" said he, with good-humored self-contempt. "Had I suspected you at the start of being a detective or a detective's spy, I would naturally have been more guarded. But the deuce take it! you are welcome to what you have made out of me."

MacWalters, who was now at the door, could only bow in response.

"Good luck to you, Mr. MacWalters."

There's no hard feelings on my part. You'll find it convenient to take the elevator down; entrance at further end of passage. Good-by!"

Then the door was closed and noiselessly locked between them.

Instantly there was a change in Merrydew's face and bearing such as is scarcely conceivable.

His new aspect was that of a master fiend, fresh from a baffling conference in the council hall of hell, with a betrayal of vile, inhuman and diabolical passion such as this characterization can suggest.

"The fool! the idiot! to blunder thus into the tiger's mouth," he chuckled, rubbing his hands with feverish energy. "Now for the Rook, the Rook, the Rook!"

And, cacklingly rolling the word over his malice-dripping tongue, he slipped like an evil shadow out of the prosaic office-den into the luxurious magnificence of the adjoining boudoir-apartment.

The passage entrance was not opened again, and yet, in less than five minutes thereafter, an odd figure stole away from its vicinity, and stealthily approached the shaft-cage of the elevator, before whose closed latticed sliding gate MacWalters was impatiently awaiting the ascent of the car, whose wire rope was quivering on the rise from the lower floor, nine stories below.

A seedy, miserable figure, with a bloated face and shuffling but noiseless step—perhaps that of a janitor's assistant or some privileged drudge about the building.

Niel carelessly noticed the man's approach, and then once more turned his face toward the shaft.

Culpable, if not fatal, unsuspecting!

In another instant the man was upon him with a wild-beast bound, the lattice-gate was shot aside, and he was precipitated into the abyss.

Feebly staying his plunge for a single instant by a desperate snatch at the wire rope, the unhappy Avenger had just time to look up at the grinning and distorted face—significant of its master-diabolism even in its disguise—that was exultingly peering down at him.

"The Rook again! the Rook himself!" was all he could murmur; and then the interrupted fall was resumed.

Almost, but not quite, at the same moment Mr. Merrydew stood in his elegant pleasure-room, with his ear to the silver mouthpiece of a speaking tube fixed in the wall, directly under a large, richly-framed, seductively-colored photograph copy of "Cleopatra's Barge."

His face was less demoniac than satisfiedly stern now, and his attitude was one of intent listening.

At last a cautious voice came floating up through the tube.

"All serene?" it asked.

"Yes," was answered down. "Inspect the lower elevator landings, and then come up."

Mr. Merrydew waited a minute. Then he stepped to the center of the richly-carpeted floor, and set his foot firmly upon a rose in the flower-fingering directly at the side of the gorgeously-canopied and tapestried double couch.

Instantly a spacious trap-door, not a seam of which had been noticeable in the carpet, opened noiselessly, disclosing the head of some steps communicating with another handsomely-furnished room below, in the lock of whose door a key could be heard softly turning.

Mr. Merrydew smiled—a terrible smile—there being no longer anything uncertain or shifting in the expression of the strong, thick-lipped, sensuous mouth.

A man's head and shoulders appeared rising through the trap, which was silently shut down as their owner, Mr. Asdrubal Holdover, stepped into the room.

The two men stood regarding each other familiarly and inquiringly for some seconds of silence, which Mr. Merrydew was the first to break.

"All quiet in Harlem?"

"As quiet as can be expected."

"Did you inspect the lower elevator landings before coming up?"

"Yes—in the basement. Good Lord! have you not but to look at my face for your answer?"

Holdover's face was frightfully pale.

"True, Asdrubal! nerve was never your special forte. What did you see?"

"A man's dead body—smashed to a jelly, with not an unbroken bone in it!" with a shudder. "They were taking it from the car-top."

"Can you guess whose it was?"

"No—whose?"

"Niel MacWalters's."

"The devil be praised!" joyfully; "do you really mean it?"

"Yes."

"Who wrought the glorious work?"

"Our good friend, the Rook."

den, proceeded, with a thorough resumption of his lazy good humor, to open a fresh bottle of champagne in his honor.

Holdover's nerve was by this time, also, fully restored.

There was an exchange of confidences as to recent happenings, after which they discussed their present situation with the utmost earnestness.

"Who is this Rook, to whom we are so immensely indebted?" Holdover at last inquired.

"That is his secret."

"And yours, too—eh, Merrydew?"

The latter grew suddenly grave.

"I do not say so," said he.

"But why do you assist him in maintaining the stunning mystery, whose preservation seems to be his delight?"

"Say, rather, his security."

"Have it so. Why, then, I repeat, do you assist him in it?"

"Honestly, I don't."

"What?"

"It is the truth. Though I confess that the Rook's identity is known to me, he never vouchsafes to communicate with me by word of mouth, and I am never permitted to see him face to face."

"That is hard to swallow, but I suppose I must take your word for it."

"Of course you must."

"But he must be beholden to you greatly to do so much in your interest."

"He is beholden to me greatly—more than to any other man on earth."

"I should say so! First the will-theft, and then this—this horrible affair as a clincher!"

"Don't ever more than allude to that."

"I shan't, Merrydew; trust me for that. Good God! as if I didn't hate to think of it as much as yourself. And yet you have never met this extraordinary benefactor face to face?"

"No, I tell you! Empty your glass, and here's looking to you. Drop the Rook—at least for the present."

"With all my heart, especially after this last service in ridding us of our deadliest enemy, as MacWalters was! But one thing more on that line?"

"Cut away!"

"Why should the Rook have hated the fellow personally, as much as even you did?"

"That is also his secret, which, however, I happen to know a little about."

"I am very curious to-day."

"The Rook is the all but invisible chief of a numerous band of miscellaneous criminals, of which MacWalters was a member. The latter was disciplined rather severely for disrespectful and mutinous conduct—even to the extent of his wife and child being hunted down to the death during his sojourn in prison."

"Good Lord! a discipline with a vengeance."

"Don't sentimentalize, Asdrubal. It annoys me. Since then MacWalters had sworn vengeance to the death upon the Rook and his slaves—for they are little better than that. There you have it. The Rook feared, no less than he hated, the man."

"I should say so! And your own hatred of MacWalters?"

"It dates further back. MacWalters was not what he seemed. I knew him when he was but a child, though it was evident, in our recent interview, that he had forgotten my personality, if not my name. However, I got it in heavy for him when he was sixteen or seventeen—perhaps a little older."

"How was that?"

"He stood between me and money. I made him a disinherited outcast and a scoundrel. His recent reformation, even under an assumed and disgraced name, meant fresh danger for me. Understand?"

"Yes. Well, the Devil be thanked, he is out of our path at last. Now let us see exactly how we stand, Merrydew."

"Agreed."

"Well, since the Avenger is no more (and you must know that I had reason to fear him too, owing to the failure of my last night's attempt, and his subsequent identification of me, through my accursed scarf-pin and the topaz dagger), we have thus far only the police detective, Westcott against us."

"What sort is he?"

"A zealous and efficient officer, but not, I believe, greatly to be feared as against us, now that his avenger-spy coadjutor is gone."

"Ah! the Rook doubtless knows the man, if I don't. Go on, Holdover."

"Well, as the case now stands, I think we are justified in considering ourselves reasonably safe, and our plot as a success."

"Of course, we are! Let me fill your glass. Don't be diffident; there's another bottle under the table, as you see."

"Thanks, and your continued prosperity! You have the stolen will in your possession?"

"It is in the upper secret drawer yonder." Merrydew indicated a superb cabinet of Japanese lacquer-work. "I call it my magic cabinet; and it is safe enough there."

"But why don't you destroy it outright? It is in its existence alone that there is danger for you."

"I know it. But I—I suppose I like to gloat over its possession."

"A perilous pastime, Merrydew!"

"Not altogether a pastime. Its restoration might possibly pay me better than its destruction."

"I don't see how that can possibly be, since, simply with no written will forthcoming, you step into one-half the estate—a princely one—though, of course, there's the deduction of my twenty-five per cent. to be considered."

"You're not out there, Holdover; but still you don't know everything."

"Enlighten me, then—but first give me a cigar."

"Listen, Holdover," and the cigar was handed over. "You must have learned that the will, besides shutting me off completely, provided for two missing heirs."

"Yes, one of them William Carlingford, the vanished only son."

"He is now altogether out of the account."

"How?"

"Dead!"

"Dead?"

"As a door-nail, or as MacWalters is, whichever you choose. Never mind how I've managed it, since I know that it is so."

"Oh, all right with all my heart, Merrydew! and so much the merrier. Well, as to the remaining missing heir provided for in the will. That was, or is, the stolen grand-daughter."

"Exactly; Elsie Ashner, child of Gertrude Carlingford Ashner, Maud's elder and only sister, long since, together with her puppy of a husband, in her grave with a broken heart over the child-theft."

"Let's drink, Merrydew. By the Old Harry! but you are well-informed in the family affairs, especially for an ostracized man."

"I ought to be in this instance."

"Why?"

After a pause, and in a tone of the bitterest cynicism:

"I loved the mother and I stole the child!"

Holdover stared, and then shrugged his shoulders.

"The deuce!" was at first all he could say.

Merrydew had drained his glass, and sat with his eyes gloomily fixed on vacancy.

"I should have said that I had procured the kidnapping," he said, after a yet longer pause.

"Where is the child now?" Holdover ventured to ask.

"I do not know exactly, though she is alive, and I could lay my hand on her at any moment."

"What is she then?"

"The companion of thieves—doubtless a thief herself, if not worse; though as yet little more than a child—thirteen, at the most. Now, with a diabolical smile, "do you begin to see my drift?"

"N-n-ot exactly," stammered the other, mildly appalled by the inhuman diabolism being evolved.

"What's to prevent me snatching the girl at any time from the gutter, and presenting myself to the aristocratic grand-mamma and stately aunt, holding in one hand the missing will, in the other the dead-alives, reeking from the slums, ingrained with vice, trade-stamped with crime? And what is to prevent my saying to them then—to these refined and delicate ladies—who love and admire me so extravagantly, as you know: 'Look you, mesdames: here is your missing will intact, and here is your missing grand-daughter and niece—Gertrude's child—though, like enough, not so intact, morally at least! I wish you joy of both, and I insist that both shall to-morrow be published to the world—especially to the fashionable and exclusive world, in which you are such bright particular and spotless stars! True, I shall lose my moiety of the Carlingford estate, but you will have gained a grand-daughter and a niece. If you don't appreciate, or are ashamed of this inestimable acquisition to the family, only pinch her that you may know of her proficiency in Billingsgate, only leave your jewels or your friend's jewels carelessly on view, that you may see her steal; only—" But that would probably be enough. Well, what think you would be the result?"

"Angels and fiends!" ejaculated Holdover, uncertain whether to applaud or shudder at the devilish ingenuity of Merrydew's genius for plotting; "you would shock them out of their senses."

"Wouldn't I?" with a satisfied chuckle. "And wouldn't they be pretty willing to fork over pretty handsomely—even perhaps to more than half the estate—for the privilege of hushing up the dead-alive, or at least getting her into seclusion until she might be half-presentably clean, you know?"

"I shouldn't wonder. Good Lord! it is too horrible to ponder on."

"I'm glad you think so. Now, as to your own affairs?"

"Mine?"

"Of course. How goes the wooing o't?"

"Slowly." And Holdover frowned.

"But really you ought soon to be marrying Maud now."

CHAPTER XIII.

A PRECIOUS PAIR OF PARTNERS.

MR. MERRYDEW made his new visitor take a seat, and, after a brief visit to the adjoining

"I doubt if I ever shall."

"What! not if you'd presently come into your share of my moiety to make a better showing on?"

"Showing! money! what are they?"

"Everything."

"Not with Maud Carlingford, who will, moreover, have sufficient money of her own. Hang it all!" with an enraged oath, "the girl doesn't and can't like me—notwithstanding her mother's constant favoring of my suit. That is the long and short of it."

There was a pause, after which: "Is there a rival—does she care for any other man?"

"No," doggedly, "I'm positive she does not. Maud is as eccentric as she is beautiful and intelligent. Apart from this recent shock, her heart and life are knit up in her mother, and in the hope of one day recovering her dead sister's child, no less than in restoring her missing brother to his own."

"So!"

"At all events," hopelessly, "I am satisfied she'll never come to like me. I suppose I'm not exactly her style."

A longer pause, at the end of which: "Well, you'll have enough money, Asdrubal; and, even as things are, you shouldn't complain."

"Why shouldn't I?"

"Well, there's the little Liscomb."

Holdover uttered a sort of impatient growl.

"Hang the little Liscomb! I hate that girl, Merrydew!"

"Come, come! that won't do, at least now. It's too late for that, as you well know."

Holdover drained his glass, filled it again without asking leave, gritted his teeth, and studied his finger-nails in silence.

"How is Bella disposed? Does she take things quietly?"

"No, curse her! She kicks constantly. Not only that, but she threatens. Her last billet—I've lost it somewhere—was both red-hot and logical. I have constant trouble in keeping her gagged."

"Why take the trouble, then, since you've no chance with Maud?"

"What do you mean?"

"Just this: The girl is pretty, and you will be rich. Do the square, honorable thing, and marry her off-hand."

"Do you take me for a fool?"

"I am not wholly decided on that point."

"You to talk of doing the square, honorable thing!"

"Don't make the mistake of losing your temper, Asdrubal. I'm thinking for you, rather than myself, just now."

"Well, Merrydew, I'm calm."

"Now look here. My advice with regard to the Liscomb wasn't so atrocious, my boy."

"That be hanged, I tell you!"

"But if she can hiss, she can sting; don't forget that. In your former spooneyings with the Liscomb, you must have told her everything you knew and hoped for—all men do under those circumstances."

"By Lucifer! I believe I did."

"And perhaps something about me, too, and our conjoint aspirations, and all that?"

"I shouldn't wonder."

"Oh! so you see I am, then, almost as much interested in keeping her quiet as you are."

"Well, what then?"

"What then? Why, my dear Asdrubal, I must simply insist on your marrying the little Liscomb, or—silencing her in some other way."

Holdover looked up with a start, and then knitted his brows; after which he suddenly brought his fist down on the table with a force that made the bottles rock and the glasses jump.

"I'll do it!" he exclaimed, in a low, intense voice. "One way or the other, she shall be silenced."

Merrydew drew such a long breath of relief as to excite the other's suspicions.

"That is well, excellently well!" he commented. "And I would candidly advise wedlock as the means, Asdrubal. It is more civilized and decidedly safer than—the other."

Holdover's eyes were upon him with an ugly look in them.

"Indeed!" he sneered. "A thousand thanks, I am sure—and couldn't you play the parson, Merrydew, to save me the fee?"

"I really wouldn't mind."

The ugly look deepened in Holdover's eyes.

"Thanks, again! And, in the mean time, what of and for yourself?"

"My dear Asdrubal," pleasantly, "what do you mean?"

"You know well enough. Disinterestedness isn't in your line. In the mean time, what of and for yourself, I say?"

Merrydew accepted the challenge without further ado, though after his own way—much the way of a cat with a mouse, in fact.

"My dear Asdrubal, listen to a little innocent romance of mine," said he, softly. "In the old days, when I loved Gertrude Carlingford, who, unfortunately, didn't love me, her sister Maud was a little girl—quite a little girl, in fact—scarcely so high," with a humorously significant gesture. "But, oh, bless and save us! what a little beauty she was!"

"Indeed!"

"Indeed, she was such a little beauty, and so instinct with delicious promise for the future, that I would occasionally say to myself—quite involuntarily, I assure you: 'How charming, how ravishing are her possibilities! Now, patience, Jacob. In the event of the inappreciative Gertrude incontinently giving you the mitten in the end, why despair? why faint by the way? But perhaps I had better not pursue the romantic episode further, for—'"

"No, by all the fiends, you'd better not!" savagely interrupted Holdover, again smiting the table, and springing up. "Curse your conniving, hypocritical soul, Merrydew! that's what you have been driving at all along."

"Well," coolly, "and what of it?"

"Curse you!" the other continued to storm, half beside himself with rage; "you intend to have Maud Carlingford for yourself."

"I know I do, and I generally have what I want. She won't look at you, so what have you to complain of, I should like to know?"

"I don't care. Neither you nor any other man shall have her!"

A contemptuous laugh was the only response. For an instant it looked as if the two men were about to fly at each other's throats, but cooler counsels, assisted by temporizing tactfulness on the part of Merrydew, finally prevailed, and they resumed their seats, if not altogether the *entente cordiale*.

"Come; the other bottle of wine here, which is as yet uncracked!" exclaimed Merrydew, in his most jovial manner. "You and I cannot afford to quarrel, my boy."

"You're right there, Merrydew. The deuce! I should say not—with that will in the cabinet yonder, though I would rather know of its being burned."

"That would not I—at least not at present. But come," raising his glass, "I shall propose a toast that ought permanently to restore our good-humor."

"Let us have it."

"To the dead body of Niel MacWalters, and may the devil have flown away with his soul! Ha! ha!"

"Ha, ha, ha! With all my heart!"

The glasses touched.

"With your leave, gentlemen," interrupted a quiet voice, "I shall have to say a word or two as to that."

And they were confronted by Niel MacWalters and Detective Westcott, from the adjoining office.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE TRAPPERS TRAPPED.

To say that the scoundrels were astonished or amazed at this unlooked-for apparition, is but feebly to characterize their first agony of agitation.

The glasses fell from their hands, and they staggered back—Holdover with a glaring, appalled look, and Merrydew with scarcely less of a panic, but also with a beast-at-bay glitter in his black-and-green eyes that was less of fear than desperateness.

But little time was given them to recover their *sang froid*.

As the Avenger had entered he had covered them with a revolver, which he still kept coolly leveled.

"I will attend to the temporary quiescence of these brutes, Mr. Westcott," said he, marching his captives into the furthest corner at the pistol's point, the better to keep them covered. "Break open the cabinet-drawer, and take possession of the stolen will."

The detective greedily obeyed, at least in part.

The drawer, which had been indicated in the conversation that had been overheard, was locked, as a matter of course, and this, proving stubborn, Westcott proceeded to pound to pieces with the butt of his revolver.

As he did so there was a strange rustling inside the cabinet, and, on the drawer being forced, it was found to be empty.

Merrydew had cautiously nudged his companion, who had also by this time somewhat recovered his self-possession.

"Pshaw! the jig's up," growled the former, in a hopelessly despondent tone. "Gentlemen, say frankly how long you have been eavesdropping, and we shall not only submit without further ado, but tell you where the will really is."

"We have been," returned MacWalters, "in the adjoining room ever since you quitted it with the two bottles of wine and the glasses."

Merrydew threw up his hands with a despairing gesture.

"Good Lord! then you overheard everything and have got us dead," he exclaimed. "Here," sullenly extending his wrists, as did Holdover likewise; "make sure of us, if you choose. It was a brief fight for a fortune, in which we have lost. The will is not in the upper, but lower, drawer."

Handcuffs were unceremoniously snapped on the pairs of wrists by the detective, while MacWalters lowered his weapon.

At the same moment Merrydew managed to produce from his waistcoat-pocket a small, shining key, which he tossed resentfully across the room.

It fell upon a certain spot in the bright-colored carpet directly at the side of the luxurious couch.

"There is the key!" he growled. "Don't trouble yourselves to smash up my cabinet any more than you have done—it is a rarity and valuable."

Both Niel and Westcott eagerly sprung for the key, and stooped to pick it up at the same instant.

Then they incontinently disappeared with a crash, the trap having sunk beneath them, precipitating them headlong into the room below.

There was an exultant shout from above, and not only did the trap neatly close again without a sound, but the flight of steps itself, down which they had been hurled, suddenly flapped up flat against the high ceiling and remained there.

Bruised, battered and sore, the entrapped men were, nevertheless, on their feet again in an instant.

"Too late to cry over spilt milk!" muttered the detective, philosophically. "These are no common scoundrels that we are dealing with. Try that door, Niel; we may yet be in time to run up the outer stairs and cut them off."

The door was found to be securely fastened, MacWalters began to empty the contents of his revolver into the lock, while Westcott, having secured a heavy piece of iron from a kit of tools found under the window, lent his assistance in prying at the door.

It presently flew open.

But simultaneously, and as if manipulated by the action of the door in swinging in, a second trap opened under their feet and the unfortunate scoundrel-catchers were once more dropped out of sight.

The second fall was harder than the first, and, though no bones were broken, many hard knocks and fresh bruises were sustained.

"By Jingo!" growled Westcott, struggling laboriously to his feet; "this sort of thing is becoming a trifle monotonous, as Mark Twain's mountaineer observed when the last mule stepped through the roof of his dug-out."

MacWalters had already risen, and was gloomy and savage, though still self-contained.

"It is our own fault," said he, half-resignedly. "We ought to have suspected some devil's trick when they held out their wrists for the bracelets."

"That is true. But let us look about us. We've got to get out of this hole somehow," said Westcott. "That is, if there be not yet another pitfall awaiting us." And he began to stamp over the floor from side to side.

The room in which they now found themselves was very different from the first into which they had been precipitated.

That had been handsomely, and even luxuriously, furnished, something after a private supper room. This was a mere lumber-room, with old boards, bags and boxes piled without uniformity over the dusty bare floor, and the one window and door coated with grime and cobwebs, as if seldom if ever used.

It might have proved interesting to the entrapped men under happier circumstances, but at present they were naturally intent upon but one purpose—to get out of it as speedily as possible—and they lost no more time in hammering and pounding away at the door fastenings for all they were worth.

Leaving them thus engaged for a moment, let it be told how MacWalters's unexpected reappearance in the world of the living had been effected.

In the first place, the corpse of the man that Holdover had really seen on the top of the elevator car, at the bottom of the shaft, was that of one of the porters of the building.

He had—most unfortunately for himself, but happily for MacWalters—been leaning in and looking down the shaft from the open lattice door of one of the midway floors when the latter's falling weight had plumped upon his shoulders, precipitating him to his death, at the same instant that the interposition had enabled Niel to clutch the lattice work at the side, and thence draw himself out upon the adjoining landing.

No less horror-stricken than thankful, MacWalters had obeyed his first thought, which was to telegraph Westcott to come to his assistance without delay, as there was a chance of the Rook's close intimacy with Merrydew being established.

But on his way to the nearest telegraph station he had been so fortunate as to meet Westcott in person, who, not seeing an immediate chance of any new developments at the Carlingford House, was on his way to rejoin his confederate down-town.

A few words of explanation on the part of Niel had been sufficient. Then the two had silently mounted together to the proximity of Merrydew's office-door. MacWalters's proficiency as a scientific pick-lock had come into requisition. They noiselessly entered the office just as Merrydew was disappearing into an adjoining room with the bottles and glasses. The communicating door had been left ajar; and there the Avenger and his companion had successfully remained in unsuspected concealment,

silently absorbing the entire edifying conversation that had taken place between Merrydew and Holdover in the boudoir-apartment.

Now to return to our friends in their captivity in the lumber-room.

The door had proved to be an exceptionally stout one, and they were still hammering unsuccessfully at the fastenings when it was opened from without by the janitor, who had been attracted by the pounding within.

They explained their situation within the limits of discretion, and then inquired how many rooms Mr. Merrydew rented in the building.

"The office and adjoining room on the top floor," was the reply, "and then he pays for a perpendicular line of single rooms straight up and down, one under another, from top to basement, and even to cellar. No one could ever guess what he could possibly want with rooms arranged in that way; but then he's an easy-going, eccentric gentleman, that always pays his way in advance, and it was nobody's business but his own. But I never heard of any trap-door connections. Maybe the gentleman has been playing you a practical joke."

"That was it!" assented Westcott, with a laugh. "That was it, undoubtedly. But we shall get the rig back on Merrydew some time, so you had better say nothing of our complaints."

"Trust me for that," said the janitor.

He was very pale, and had seemed to control himself with difficulty during the conversation.

"What disturbs you, my man?" inquired Niel. "You seem out of sorts."

"Oh, Lord! and I feel so," was the reply. "A poor man pitched head-first down the elevator shaft a short time ago. It was an awful spectacle! He was one of my assistants here, but fortunately leaves neither wife nor children."

Though fully half an hour had elapsed since their mishap, the two men hurried up-stairs again to Mr. Merrydew's office.

The door had been unlocked, as if to invite an investigation, for the rooms, as had been nearly expected, were found to be deserted.

"We're dished for the present," admitted the detective. "But those wristlets of mine must have cost them some trouble."

"Not much," said MacWalters. The best of handcuffs would be of small inconvenience to such veteran rogues. Remember that I speak from experience."

"You think so? I rather prided myself on those bracelets, which were after a new design."

"I am sure of what I say, Westcott. However, the best of their secrets are now in our possession, which is no little satisfaction; though I doubt not that it will be some time before we clap eyes on either of them again."

CHAPTER XV.

A BIT OF FAMILY HISTORY—A FRESH COMPLICATION.

MACWALTERS'S prediction proved to be correct.

Days and days elapsed, the body of the unfortunate Miles Carlingford was settled in its last resting-place, his assassination was still a mystery—barring the suspicion attaching to the Rook, whom public opinion generally and rather jeeringly regarded as wholly a myth, gotten up by the detective department for the express purpose of covering up its shortcomings in the case—the will was still missing, even the tragedy itself was becoming a stale sensation, and not a sign had been given by either Merrydew or Holdover.

It should have been mentioned, however, that, previous to quitting Merrydew's rooms for the last time, the Avenger and his detective-companion had almost demolished the Japanese cabinet, with a determination to solve the secret of its construction.

Of course the will had not been discovered, but the contrivance—an ingenious electrical attachment by which the drawers could be turned upside down, and their contents secretly deposited in a receptacle underneath the floor on which the cabinet rested, by the mere pressure of any one of several buttons set in various parts of the wall—by which the evanishment of the valuable document had been effected was made apparent.

No will being forthcoming, the estate, thought to be worth more than two millions, was now in the hands of Mrs. Carlingford's lawyers for settlement, on the basis of the original testamentary provisions of Mrs. Carlingford-Merrydew.

This lady, a number of years after the death of her first husband—Godfrey Carlingford, by whom she had had one child, Miles—had left the great Carlingford estate in her absolute and unconditional possession, had married again.

Her second venture in matrimony had been with a Mr. Grantley Merrydew. He was an eminently handsome, but needy and somewhat dilapidated, man-about-town, who, after spending a few thousands of his wife's money, was considerate enough to get shot to death in an upper Broadway gambling row, leaving her with a single infant olive-branch by which to

remember him—the Jacob Merrydew of this narrative.

Widowed a second time, the lady, who was of Scottish descent, with a good share of the proverbial canniness in her composition, was content to spend the remainder of her life in educating her two sons and looking after her money.

The elder, Miles, was by all odds her favorite, and deservedly so, for he developed fine principles and was in every way worthy of the loving care and unstinted means lavished upon his rearing.

Jacob Merrydew, the half-brother, who was twelve years the younger, developed, on the contrary, an incorrigibly evil disposition and most reprehensible habits at an early age, such as alienated him yet more pronouncedly from the mother's heart.

The consequence was that when she died, at a time when Miles was thirty-two and Jacob twenty, her property was found to have been devised in the eccentric manner that has partly furnished the inner *motif* for our story.

The entire estate, subject solely to an income of two thousand a year for the black sheep, Jacob, was left to Miles, unreservedly, but with the single stipulation that, in the event of his dying without testamentary devise to the contrary, one-half the estate should descend to the practically disinherited half-brother, or to his heirs.

Such was the source of the situation at the present time.

Miles Carlingford had married early and well, and after a brief but not over brilliant career in business, had retired to the enjoyment of his mother's millions, which had not only been kept intact, but had greatly increased through prudent investments and the natural law by which money makes money, if but kept intact, without any special exertion on the part of the possessor. Jacob Merrydew had swallowed his resentment at first, and kept up a quasi-friendly relation with the Carlingfords until his bad run of luck at love-making with Gertrude, the elder daughter. After that he had taken himself off to his own pursuits, rumored as of a more or less questionable character, while ostensibly pursuing the practice of his legal profession; numerous instances had arisen as betraying his secret hostility and cherished bad blood toward the Carlingfords, and he had readily become identified as the family foe, whose sole hope for the future was in the vastly improbable event of his half-brother dying before himself, without leaving a will, the mere presentation of which would be tantamount to the destruction of his hopes, and the non-existence of which would as inevitably establish him in a moiety of the superb estate.

The reader now has the outlines of the case in a nutshell.

A will had been made, but was now missing, and practically non-existent, unless some previous will of similar purport should be found.

It was the hope of Mrs. Carlingford's lawyers that either this would prove the case, or the stolen will might be brought to light. They were now, pending a final settlement, prosecuting the searches and offering large rewards, with a view of accomplishing one or another of these ends; Merrydew had as yet presented no formal demand for the establishment of his claim, having good enough reasons for exercising patience in the matter, as the reader has seen; and consequently the question of a final settlement was still in suspense.

Matters were at this crisis when James Westcott one day received a note from Mrs. Carlingford, urging him to call at her house with his friend Mr. MacWalters, without unnecessary delay.

When the men were in her presence, she greeted them with effusive politeness, and asked their opinion of a remarkable anonymous communication which she handed them.

It had been received that morning by post, bore date of the preceding day, was written in an obviously disguised hand, and contained the following:

"DEEREST MADAM:—

"A burglarious attempt will be made on your residence to-morrow (Tuesday) night, whose object, wonderful to relate, is not the felonious acquisition of property, but the secret abduction of your daughter Maud, after first throwing her into an anæsthetic trance."

"Give no warning to the police authorities (of whose privity inefficiency you must have had sufficient evidence in the matter of the stolen will and the unexplained mystery of your lamented husband's tragic death), but trust to the writer's courage and discretion in foiling the infamous and criminal enterprise, of which you are herewith advised."

"He dare not at present declare his name, nor the manner of his possessing this piece of information—the betrayal of which, if generally known, might cost him his life; but he is none the less sincerely your own and your daughter's well-wisher and friend."

"The writer would, moreover, suggest that Miss Carlingford simulate insensibility at the critical moment, for such a period as she may deem prudent."

"Should she have the nerve to do this, it would facilitate the exposure and identification of the persons engaged in the conspiracy."

"For the rest, merely remain on the alert, and trust in your faithful warning-giver's interposition."

"If you should agree to all that the writer has advised, pray hang a bright-colored rug out of one of your front upper windows to-morrow (Tuesday) afternoon."

A FRIEND OF THE FAMILY."

"What do you think of it?" asked Mrs. Carlingford, directing her question rather toward MacWalters, individually.

Miss Carlingford, who was also present, likewise looked inquiringly at the two men, though with decidedly more amusement than anxiety in her lovely eyes.

Westcott made a sign to his companion, who took up the subject with his accustomed modesty and firmness.

"Do you wish us to advise and act in the matter, ma'am?" he asked.

"Certainly," returned the elder lady, "and I wish to defer to you. It was for this that I sent for you."

The young man hesitated.

"I am trying to think," said he, "just what bearing this affair can have upon the—the will-and-murder case."

"What?" mother and daughter exclaimed, almost in the one breath; "do you see any connection between them?"

"Undoubtedly."

"What then," inquired Mrs. Carlingford, "do you first advise with regard to this anonymous letter?"

"It is now afternoon—to hang out the bright-colored rug without delay!" was the prompt reply.

"I've taken your counsel in advance," cried the widow. "The signal of assent is already displayed at one of the third-story front windows!"

CHAPTER XVI.

"NUMBER ONE ON THE LONG SCORE!"

THE Avenger went on to explain his advice more fully.

"The writer of this anonymous communication," said he, "is evidently, to my mind, an interested scoundrel. Nevertheless, I should counsel that his advice, so far as the dissimulation suggested for Miss Carlingford, be followed to the very letter. That is," with a respectfully searching glance at the young lady, "should she have both the inclination and the nerve for the part."

Miss Carlingford colored a little.

"I shall perhaps be better able to decide as to that," she observed, "when I am more fully informed as to what would be required of me, and the purpose to be obtained."

"The object of the anonymous writer is apparent to me," continued MacWalters, with a deferential bow. It is this: "Whether the attempt at abduction is to be of his own contrivance or not, he evidently intends to be on hand, either for the purpose of interrupting it, and thus lay your family under serious obligations to him, on the score of common gratitude, or he means to assist it at the final moment, and thus get you into his own power."

"But is the latter inference tenable?" asked Mrs. Carlingford, "in view of the warning conveyed?"

"Perfectly, inasmuch as the warning itself, anonymous as it is, would have caused some sort of belief in the writer's good faith. Confess that some impression of this sort has already been made on your minds."

The ladies exchanged surprised looks, but their silence was a sufficient assent to the proposition.

"Now," continued MacWalters, "one or another of these being accepted as the nameless writer's motive, of course either of them must come to naught. Detective Westcott and I will be on hand to attend to that, besides fathoming the affair, and making such arrests as shall be deemed necessary. Therefore—"

He made a momentary pause, Miss Carlingford was reading his face so earnestly, in anticipation of the next words.

"—Therefore, I would counsel dissimulation on the part of the young lady, if possible, even until the would-be abductors should reach the open air, with her own form as their apparently unconscious burden. After that the denouement would speedily shape itself."

There was an embarrassed pause, and the ladies turned inquiringly toward James Westcott, for either a corroboration or refutation of his associate's views, as the case might be.

"I agree with my friend's opinions and counsel in the case in every particular," said the detective, with much simplicity. "Or rather let me say that he has picked the complication to pieces, and prescribed for its remedy, with a masterliness that I could not hope to emulate."

Niel made a deprecating gesture, but neither Mrs. or Miss Carlingford, both of whom were very thoughtful, seemed to think that undue praise had been afforded.

"Don't you both agree," asked the former, at length, "that the entire decision called for a most exceptional one?"

The men promptly indicated an affirmative.

"In the event of my daughter's compliance with this extraordinary advice, would the

affair be kept away from the newspapers, happen what might?"

The widow was likewise reassured on this point.

"What do you say, Maud?" and Mrs. Carlingford turned a little suspensefully to her daughter. "You shall speak for yourself in the entire matter."

Miss Carlingford blushed and laughed nervously, and then a look of quiet resolution came into the sweet and noble face.

"I will do it!" said she, at last; and the strange matter was decided.

But as the two men arose to go, with this understanding, the young lady detained them with a gesture.

"Wait, please!" she said, particularizing Niel. "It has cost me a struggle to assent to your proposition, and I only hope I shall have the courage to carry it out. But don't you owe me something in return?"

MacWalters bowed, and placed everything in his power at her service.

"Oh, I do not demand a great deal!" cried the young woman, gayly. "Only the satisfaction of an ordinary curiosity, which I doubt not my mother fully shares with me."

Niel looked up expectantly.

"We just want to know," Miss Carlingford went on, "just what connection you can possibly see between this fresh mystery and—and our recent great family misfortune."

MacWalters hesitated.

"It is impossible for me to accede to your request—now," he answered reluctantly. "It is only an impression of mine—a distinct impression such as never yet deceived me or failed of verification—but I cannot explain its nature, simply because I do not yet comprehend it myself. However, I can safely promise that the connection will be explained by this night's outcome, should nothing prematurely disturb the conspiracy that it is our intention to expose and destroy."

The ladies contented themselves with this, and the two men, after respectfully declining earnestly proffered refreshments, took their departure, with the understanding that they were to come on guard after dusk.

They were duly careful to avoid outside observation while making their exit, as they had likewise been in entering the house.

"You seemed to tumble to that new racket like an avalanche!" commented Westcott.

"A clumsily-concocted plot!" said MacWalters; "though not without an element of boldness to recommend it."

"Who's your head man in it—Merrydew?"

"Of course."

And then they separated.

"Eva, my dear," said MacWalters, at supper a little later, "there won't be time for your lessons to-night. I shall want you to accompany me."

The girl set down the tea-pot, which she was presiding over at the moment, to look up at him in glad surprise.

"Good, daddy!" she cried, clapping her hands together. "In what shape?"

"I think your good-little-Sunday-school-boy make-up will answer," replied her protector, reflectively.

Eva clapped her hands again, and, half an hour later, they quitted the place in each other's company accordingly.

At the first street-crossing Silas Wiener put in an exceptionally dilapidated and woebegone appearance, looking as if he hadn't got onto a two-shilling tip for many a day, which was probably the truth, without any poetical ingredient.

"Do you know the Carlingford double house, facing Mount Morris Park, on Madison avenue?" abruptly demanded MacWalters.

"Where the murder was committed? Of course I do. Why, my dear sir, in my earlier and less impecunious days, when gold double-eagles were a mere drug with me, to be idly scattered by the handful over—"

"Shut up! You will ensconce yourself watchfully in the east edge of the Park, facing the residence, from eight o'clock this evening until—something unusual happens, when you may receive a signal from me. Fill your stomach first, if you feel like it."

He dropped some money into the man's hand, and the other sped away without a word.

The entire locality was more or less villainous. A block further on, and a man was dimly discerned rushing breathlessly toward them, from the direction of the adjoining avenue, with a straggling mob of men and boys, including two policemen, in hot pursuit, which, however, was not very promising, the fugitive was such a capital runner.

"It's Crachitt!" cried Eva.

At a former time MacWalters would have assisted a flying thief's escape at any risk to himself; but now his eyes gleamed, his lips compressed, and there was only the Avenger in his aspect, as he glided across the fugitive's expectant path.

"Stand aside, Niel!" shouted the hunted man; "don't you see that I'm put to my trumps? Can't you let bygones be by—"

Crash! went the Avenger's fist in the runner's

face at that instant, and as the policemen came panting up, followed by the yelling mob, he was found to be writhing on his face, with an iron foot across his neck.

"What's it for?" coolly asked MacWalters, nodding to the officers as they secured their crestfallen man. "Pocket-picking?"

"Worse than that, Niel. A basement house-breaking, and red-handed at that," one of them replied.

"Good! If you want my evidence, you know my address."

And then, as the Avenger hurried away with his little companion, he softly murmured to himself:

"Number One on the long score!"

CHAPTER XVII.

AN EVENTFUL NIGHT.

THE night that was expected to be eventful wore on apace in the Carlingford residence.

"Who is the pretty little boy with you, Mr. MacWalters?" inquired Miss Carlingford, on her way to her room, while her mother also paused to admire the good-little-Sunday-school-boy who was bashfully shrinking back under the young man's protecting wing.

"My protegee, a sort of adopted child," replied Niel, not very communicatively. "Don't you see that the kind ladies are speaking about you, Evelyn?"

But Eva also saw that she was only the good-little-Sunday-school-boy for the time being, and only shrunk back yet more timidly.

"Evelyn! what a very pretty name!" And they both patted the say-seeming little curly head as they passed along the corridor.

Westcott and MacWalters were comfortably ensconced in a convenient upper-hall alcove between the doors of Mrs. and Miss Carlingford's sleeping apartments, and commanding a near view of each by the faint starlight filtering in from front and rear.

All the house-lights had been extinguished at the accustomed hour for retirement—eleven o'clock—and the place secured as usual.

The presence of the detectives in the house was not suspected by any of the domestics, not one of whom was in the secret of the anticipated event. But electric alarms had long been connected with the apartments of the three men-servants, the butler, the footman and the coachman, who could be aroused at any instant. Moreover, the burglar-alarm had been purposely rendered useless.

This was all. And the watch dragged on, and the night deepened apace.

One o'clock had sounded silverly through the silent house from the ormolu clock in the dining-room.

"It would be a beastly come-down for us," whispered Westcott, "if the whole thing should turn out a hoax, after our taking such solemn stock in it."

MacWalters replied in the same cautious voice, while drawing his sleepy little companion into a more comfortable position at his side.

"No danger of that, I think," said he. "I sort of feel that we are not upon a false scent. But hush!" warningly.

The door of a small room at the end of the passage, and adjoining Mrs. Carlingford's had opened.

Then a white-robed figure, with a night-lamp in its hand, came into view, with wide-staring but unspeculative eyes, and a vaguely alert, anxious look in the parted lips and hushed, dreamful face.

The watchers touched hands intelligently, for the significance of the apparition was patent to both.

It was Miss Liscomb in a sleep-walking trance.

She came slowly and glidingly along the passage, pausing directly before their place of concealment, with the anxiety deepening in her face.

Words issue from her lips, brokenly at first, but gradually growing intelligible.

"Don't—don't take me in there again!" she murmured, with a little shiver. "Don't, Asdrubal, don't! What! will you really marry me, then, and save me from disgrace? Well, then, I will go with you, but oh!" with a convulsive shudder; "how I loathe to look on the poor old dead face again, with the red stab-wound in the breast!"

Her left hand and wrist were shrinkingly extended, and she passed on, as if led sorely against her will by an imaginary companion.

The watchers silently followed, the disguised Eva thoroughly wide awake now, and even the most curious of the trio.

As had been anticipated, the somnambulist paused before the door of the room which had been the scene of Mr. Carlingford's murder.

"Here it will end," thought MacWalters. "Mrs. Carlingford told me incidentally that the apartments on this side had been kept under lock and key since the funeral."

But no; it did not end.

The sleep-walker drew back her extended arm with an effort, as if wrenching it from an invisible clutch, produced a key from the bosom of her dressing-robe, softly fitted it in the lock, and entered the fatal room.

Obedient to a sign from Westcott, MacWalters followed closely, the former remaining with the girl-boy, whom he held back by the arm, at the threshold, to take continued cognizance of any alarm from below or without.

The sleep-walker had stolen to the side of the bed, once more reluctantly and with extended wrist, as if forcibly drawn thither, where she set down the light on a small table, and, still as if compelled, bent over the composed and snowy couch with shuddering and shrinking movements.

It was evident that she once more beheld the murdered form there, as upon that tragic morning.

"Oh, I cannot, Asdrubal, I cannot!" she pleaded. "To touch, to kiss that horrid, bleeding thing! My God, I cannot! no, not even for the coveted wedding-ring you promised me. Do not force me to it—desist, I say, desist!"

With a whispered shriek, she struggled back, though still evidently under the power of her imaginary companion.

Then she straightened herself, with a sort of self-compelled resoluteness.

"I will do it on one condition," she murmured. "You swear you will marry me, too? Well, then—tell me truly whose hand it was that wrought this bloody deed! Tell me that, and I will do as you insist—yes, I will even kiss and embrace this horrid dead thing!"

Was there a revelation coming? MacWalters, who was close to the somnambulist's side, waited in hushed suspense, and the twain in the doorway, who were likewise within hearing, leaned eagerly forward.

"Ah! but that is not telling me the murder-secret," she went on. "The Rook! Who and what is he? Asdrubal, you are deceiving me. I don't believe there is such a person. Tell me the truth, Asdrubal. Who stole the will, and then performed this awful deed? No, I meditate no treachery. I do not seek to know, merely to acquire fresh power over you; for now that you are really going to make me your wife, I am content, and would not press you for any fresh secret to your ruin. 'Tis false! I would not, I tell you! Tell me the truth, and even if it was your own hand that did this awful thing, I would not love you less. Speak, I say! The Rook—the Rook! Oh, what nonsense—a real man with such a name! Why not the Crow, the Raven, or the Vulture? It was either yourself, Asdrubal, or that villain Merrydew—I know it, I am sure of it! No, no; do not strike me! I take that back, Asdrubal—it couldn't have been you."

At this juncture MacWalters receive a peremptory signal from Westcott, whose quick ear had caught the sound of a movement at one of the drawing-room windows.

MacWalters hesitated.

Then, taking up the night lamp with one hand, he gently clasped the somnambulist's wrist with the other, and strove to lead her away without breaking her trance.

But this was not possible. She held back, confusion and terror came into her face, there was danger of her suddenly awaking, perhaps with a scream, which would never do.

Niel dropped Miss Liscomb's wrist, and then, beckoning to Eva, handed her the lamp.

Then, without more ado, he unceremoniously grasped the lady in his arms, clapped his hand over her lips, and strode out of the room, preceded by his lamp-bearer.

Westcott smiled grimly, as he drew back.

"It was the only way," he whispered, approvingly. "But make haste, and be cautious. Our expected guests are on hand."

It was not until he was fairly in Miss Liscomb's room that Niel ventured to gradually release the lady—and very gradually, at that—who, by this time thoroughly startled into wakefulness, was gazing wildly and terrifiedly into his face.

"Listen!" he whispered, impressively. "You have been walking in your sleep, and I was compelled to use you in this way, lest an involuntary cry or exclamation on your part might ruin a little plot that is under way in the house, with Mrs. Carlingford's approval. Do you understand?"

She had before this recognized MacWalters's face, and nodded an affirmative—for she was not yet wholly released, and the broad hand was still upon her lips.

"You are sure you are quite yourself?"

A thoroughly composed nod, by way of answer, this time.

He forthwith set her on her feet, and stepped back respectfully.

Miss Liscomb blushed painfully.

"Was it in the corridor that you found me, sir?" she asked.

"Yes."

An expression of intense relief came into her face.

"Thank you, sir!" she said, and pointed to the door.

CHAPTER XVIII.

PLOT AND COUNTERPLOT.

BEFORE leaving the restored somnambulist to herself, a sudden thought occurred to MacWalters, and at the door he turned.

"Has Mrs. Carlingford confided in you what is expected to happen here in this house to-night?" he asked.

"I do not know what you mean, sir."

"Good! She has seen fit to keep you in the dark, so let me advise you to remain so—no matter what extraordinary things may happen in your vicinity." And, with another respectful bow, he quitted the room.

Miss Liscomb smiled as the door closed behind him.

In spite of her lingering sense of mortification, the idea of her remaining kept in the dark, after such an intimation was too amusing for anything.

She drew an extra wrap around her, opened a communicating door, and slipped into Mrs. Carlingford's apartment, whose occupant, fully dressed in anticipation of the approaching ordeal, had nodded to sleep in a great easy-chair before the fire.

Miss Liscomb smiled again, while a look of intense, devouring curiosity came into her face. Then she also seated herself comfortably, and, with her eyes fixed watchfully upon her mistress, waited.

In the mean time, Niel had no sooner rejoined his companions in the corridor before the indications of an entrance being stealthily forced below had become unmistakably apparent to the expert ears that were on the alert for them.

As a first precaution, and in accordance with a previous understanding, Westcott approached the door of Miss Carlingford's room—which also communicated with her mother's, by the way.

Here he made a slight scratching noise, as a notification that the hour for the ordeal was at hand.

A faint "Yes, thank you, I am prepared," from within was the satisfactory response.

The watchers at once slipped back into their place of observation, and waited.

The sounds below continued, though they would scarcely have been heeded or thought significant by less experienced ears.

"They're cool hands," whispered Eva, whose not very praiseworthy lessons afforded by Paradise Corners were reviving animatedly, much to her delight. "They're in the big parlor already, and I can hear one of them slipping to the street-door to unlock it. It's better than a circus."

A stern pressure of MacWalters's hand admonished her to silence.

A moment later, and the stealthy steps of the intruders were upon the stair.

Then, three in number, they were for an instant grouped before the door of Miss Carlingford's apartment, and the eyes of the secret watchers were strained to make them severally out.

Both Westcott and MacWalters were then somewhat astonished, for, in spite of the uncertain light, they were confident that in the taller of the ruffians—all of whom were masked—they recognized Holdover; which would make the attempted abduction to be going on in serious good faith, and not a mere sham for giving Merrydew an opportunity to exhibit his heroism in effecting a rescue, as they had about concluded would turn out to be the case.

The men remained for a moment, silently listening at the door.

Then their leader noiselessly opened it and entered the room, followed more hesitatingly, after a slight interval, by the two others.

The door had been left partly open, so that the watchers could obtain a fair view of the interior—an opportunity which it is needless to say they availed themselves of to the fullest extent.

It was a strangely if not a wholly exceptionally dramatic scene, the working of this novel plot and counterplot that was silently going on there in the dead of night.

The interior of the richly furnished, luxurious bedchamber was mildly but distinctly illuminated by a little silver night-lamp, with a delicate green shade, that rested upon a small reading-table near the head of the bed.

Its tempered rays fell softly upon the various belongings of the room, which were everywhere characteristic of the pure and elevated, if somewhat luxurious tastes of its maidenly occupant.

Miss Carlingford reclined upon the couch, apparently plunged in a deep, almost breathless slumber, which had probably come upon her while reading, as was suggested by her attitude and the book that still remained in one listless hand, a finger of which was yet between the leaves.

She was completely dressed, except for the loose, garnet-colored wrapper, exquisitely embroidered and of some soft, clinging material which had replaced her gown.

She lay partly on her back, partly on her side, in an attitude of unconscious grace, with her head and face pillowed on her arm, whose drooping curve slightly shadowed and hid her features.

"She does it to a charm!" thought MacWalters. "The best of actresses could not simulate the unconsciousness of sleep more perfectly."

The chief intruder had by this time advanced to the side of the bed, apparently surprised, but

not disagreeably so, at perceiving that the sleeper was dressed.

His two followers seized the opportunity to noiselessly appropriate several small and valuable objects of *bric-a-brac* art from a convenient whatnot, and then looked around them hungrily through the eyelet holes of their masks with characteristic eagerness.

Both Westcott and MacWalters smiled grimly. Whatever doubt might exist as to the leader ruffian's identity, the natures of his assistants had lost no time in betraying themselves.

The leader now produced a delicate handkerchief and a small vial, with whose contents he saturated the former, which then, with a light, stealthy movement, he laid over the young lady's face.

Miss Carlingford, who had been skillfully counterfeiting all along, as the reader will have already guessed, was not unprepared for this move, having been thoroughly "coached" beforehand.

Just prior to the application of the kerchief, she had secretly inhaled an exceptionally long breath, which she now retained as a reservoir of strength, while exercising due care to let it out little by little without an attempt at renewal.

At last she lay as one completely insensible, without a lingering flutter.

The "operator" cautiously lifted the handkerchief, and appeared satisfied.

The witness of the strange scene looked on with breathless interest, even the fellow's companion-rascals forgetting to pocket any more valuables for the instant in their curiosity and suppressed excitement.

Their leader made a significant sign to them, and then raised the apparently unconscious young lady in his strong arms.

At this instant there was a hoarse, strange cry—something between a feminine scream and the spitting of a tiger-cat—a white figure darted across the room, and the mask was furiously torn from his face.

CHAPTER XIX.

WHAT CAME OF IT ALL.

BOTH MacWalters and Westcott with difficulty repressed an angry and impatient curse.

Was their careful counterplotting suddenly to come to naught, at the most critical moment, by such a vile and unexpected *contretemps*?

The latter had explained itself on the instant.

The marplot was Isabella Liscomb. In company with Mrs. Carlingford—who had been awakened in season—she had been secretly viewing the strange scene from a partly-opened communicating door, when, on suspecting the identity of the would-be abductor of Miss Carlingford with her own recreant and perjured lover, a frenzy of combined rage and jealousy had mastered her, and she had sprung at his throat with the naturalness of a wild beast launching itself upon the devastator of its treasured hopes.

Indeed, having torn aside Holdover's mask with a violence that caused him to drop his burden, she was now fastening on his neck with one hand while clawing at his face and eyes with the hooked fingers of the other, like an enraged cat.

"Traitor—false, perjured, vile, cowardly, forsworn, doubly-damned monster of deceit!" she hoarsely hissed between her grinding teeth. "I will kill you—kill, kill, kill you!"

But the interruption was not without its own remedy, brutal though it was.

Maddened, with his convulsed face already scored by the fierce clawing nails, Holdover's powerful fist was already brandished aloft, intent upon a blow.

It fell at last—a remorseless blow—and his fragile assailant was senseless at his feet, where he did not scruple to grind his boot-heel furiously down upon her helpless breast.

The outside watchers turned white with suppressed emotion, the indignant blood coursing like lava through their veins, but fortunately they were enabled to restrain themselves.

Holdover had recovered from his cold-bloodedness by a great effort.

He noted with satisfaction as he replaced his mask that Miss Carlingford had not moved but was still to all appearances completely insensible.

He beckoned to his followers, who forthwith obeyed.

"It was a close call, but all may yet be well," he said to them, in a low voice. "The next room is the mother's, I think. Slip in there, one of you, and see if we have been watched by yet another secret witness, or if all is well. You, Bill, will have to assist me with the young lady, if I find her too heavy for me."

One of the men stole through the communicating door, and quickly returned.

"The old lady's in a stuffed chair afore the fire, sleepin' like a dead woman," he reported.

"All right and all well!" and Holdover again lifted Miss Carlingford in his arms. "I can manage this. You fellows fetch along whatever wraps and warm fixings you may find in that

closet yonder. The drive will like enough be a cold one."

As he passed out of the room they obeyed with alacrity, after snapping up every jewel and trinket in sight on the dressing-case with the avidity of half-starved fowls at a bursted corn-crib.

As the trio passed down the stairs, sure-footed in the dark, the watchers stepped silently out of their concealment.

"Wait!" whispered Niel. "Mrs. Carlingford will never forgive a failure to arouse her at this juncture."

He slipped swiftly through the daughter's into the mother's apartment.

Mrs. Carlingford was not sleeping, but had fainted in her chair.

Knowing what was at stake on her discretion, she had succeeded in suppressing an exclamation when Miss Liscomb had suddenly started from her side, to fly at the abductor's throat; but the subsequent cruel spectacle of the wronged girl's penalty for the rash move had been too much for the good lady, and she had reeled back from her post of observation only to swoon away in her chair.

MacWalters, however, succeeded in restoring her to consciousness in a few seconds, after which he hastily explained the situation.

"Good Heavens! that poor girl!" exclaimed Mrs. Carlingford, her mind filled with its last terrifying impression. "Bless me, Mr. MacWalters, could you have believed there was anything between her and that awful man?"

"Never mind that now, ma'm. You must hasten if you would witness the denouement of our plot. Here, this window will enable you to see everything."

And, having established her at the window, Niel hurried away.

On repassing through the adjoining room, he came to a hesitating pause, for Miss Liscomb was still lying forlornly insensible where she had fallen.

But both Westcott and Eva had already crept past the door on the track of the abductors, who could even now be heard at the street door.

Expediency must triumph over even humanity at times, and, after merely raising the unhappy young woman and laying her on the bed, the young man stole swiftly after his companions.

A close carriage, with two men on the box and another at the door, was drawn up at the curb.

Holdover reached the sidewalk, with Miss Carlingford still apparently unconscious in his arms, and with his two immediate associates at his heels.

Westcott and MacWalters, who had ensconced themselves in the vestibule upon its being deserted by the others, were going to wait for the anticipated rescuer until the last minute, before personally interfering to prevent the consummation of the abduction, but as yet there was not a sign of him.

At last, just as Holdover was on the point of thrusting his burden into the coach, and when the two watchers were about to precipitate themselves upon the scene, a large, powerful man, with a clatter of running feet and a sort of overpowering, breezy rush, the deliverer they were expecting was on hand.

Holdover had started back with an alarmed expression, only to catch a fist blow on the shoulder that sent him reeling, and simultaneously Miss Carlingford sprung out of his grasp with a suddenness of both animation and vigor that was sufficiently disconcerting, to say the least.

The man was momentarily bewildered; but it was no time for anything but the most prompt and telling measures, if the adventure was to be redeemed.

His five confederates had instantly sprung to his support, leaving the vehicle and horses to themselves, but the rescuer had suddenly developed prodigies of strength, valor and fighting capacities little short of the miraculous.

He was everywhere at once, his opponents going down successively before his shoulder-hitting prowess like rows of bricks, and, though up again and again with causthetic hardihood and buoyancy (for all were ruffians of a genuine fighting stock,) their efforts seemed to avail but little against his trained and systemized fury, as it might be characterized.

At last his hat fell off, while his turned-up coat-collar simultaneously subsided, to the more certain revelation of his personality.

This served to electrify Holdover out of his momentary bewilderment, and, indeed, to inspire him with a perfect diabolism of resentment.

"Dog of a Merrydew!" he yelled, springing with a sort of hoarse roar at the interloper's throat. "Hypocritical marplot and traitor! So it's your old game, is it, and with me at that? All for yourself and nothing for any one else?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the giant, repelling the individual assault with a swift, skillful movement, and then shaking off the renewed closing-in of the entire group-like dewdrops from the lion's mane. "Ho, ho, ho! So you thought to circumvent me, pitiful cur that you are!"

Libertine—wretch! did you think that the honor of my poor brother's own family was nothing to me—that I would submit to your designs upon my own fair relative without interposing my all in her defense?"

And he resumed his prodigious efforts with renewed success.

Miss Carlingford, who had taken refuge halfway up the stoop, heard and saw like one in a dream, for the reaction from the self-contained terrors she had gone through during her harsh ordeal was very great.

But both Westcott and MacWalters could not avoid smiling as Merrydew's brave words arose above the fray, they were in such keeping with the falseness and fustian they had anticipated and, indeed, predicted.

"I think it is about time for us to wade in," suggested Westcott. "Don't you?"

"Yes," assented Niel. "Leave the two thieves who were up-stairs with Holdover to me; I know them both."

With that, both men suddenly precipitated themselves into the scrimmage like a brace of thunderbolts, striking out right and left with telling execution, though not without due discrimination.

Merrydew was not long in perceiving that they were on his side, and, though evidently a little embarrassed by the unexpectedness of the reinforcement, he was speedily redoubling his own efforts with the vim of one who gloried in a fight.

At last, with the exception of Holdover and the coach-driver, every man of the kidnapping party was down, though still keeping their vanquishers' hands full before being quite overpowered.

At a despairing signal from Holdover, the driver sprang upon the box and gathered up the lines.

The former, however, before following his example, could not resist the temptation to draw a revolver—the first firearm, strange to say, that had yet figured in the affair—and discharge it full at the enemy nearest at hand, which chanced to be MacWalters, at that moment in a kneeling attitude while engaged in clapping the bracelets on the second of the captives he had marked for his own.

The shot missed its intended victim, but struck poor little Eva, the *pseudo* little Sunday-school boy, who fell weltering in his blood; and Holdover, springing on the coach-box beside the driver, was driven rapidly away.

The brave child, however, had instantly got on her feet again before her mishap could be noted, and stood erect, pressing her hand hard against her shoulder.

Miss Carlingford had summoned up sufficient strength to re-enter the house and return to her room.

At this juncture, when the battle was at an end and the danger over, two of the regular guardians of the night put in an appearance.

CHAPTER XX.

THE UPSHOT OF IT ALL.

DETECTIVE WESTCOTT and MacWalters, both of whom were well-known to the two officers who had at last come upon the scene, made the necessary explanations.

A burglary had been attempted upon the Carlingford house, but had been partly foiled through its mistress having been forewarned, with the timely assistance of the explanation-givers, and the large gentleman who had opportunely rushed to the fray and done good work—of course, indicating Merrydew as the last-mentioned hero.

The result was the four captives left on the ground, two other scoundrels having succeeded in making their escape.

This was the story in all its simplicity, if not quite in all its veracity.

It was acquiesced in by Mr. Merrydew, was not denied by any one of the prisoners—probably under the impression that an attempt at forcible abduction, including chloroforming, incurred a severer penalty than the charges preferred—and it was not questioned by the policemen, who at once proceeded to take the prisoners into custody.

"Wait a moment, if you please, Messrs. Officers," said MacWalters.

He picked up a dark lantern, which one of the scoundrels had let fall in the struggle, and, opening its blazing bull's-eye, proceeded to send the shaft inquisitively into the captives' faces in slow succession.

"So, my old pals, every one of you!" he muttered in his hard, steely voice; and then he began to tell them off one by one for the officers' benefit. "These two are Flash Frank and Daisy Mitchell, who filled their pockets with jewelry and knick-knacks while in one of the sleeping-rooms—the property will be duly identified. And who have we here?"—bawling up yet another rascal into the searching blaze. "Ah! Knothole Wilson, of Growler Alley, Paradise Corners! and an ex-convict, which ought to yield him at least a tenner for to-night's amusement. Come, old standby, don't hang back!" bringing up the fourth. "Nosey Chambers shouldn't mind public attention after three terms in twelve years for house-breaking, deadly as-

sault and area-thieving respectively. Take them along, officers. Mr. Westcott and I are complainants and witnesses; and even if the Rook, their master, ventures to work a good or straw-bail in either case, I doubt if it will help their cases."

The officers gathered their prisoners, who were already handcuffed, well in hand.

One of the latter was disposed to be tearful.

"Oh, Mac, Mac! how *kin* you do it?" he whimpered. "How *kin* you blow it this way on we 'uns what was once your friends?"

"Friends!" he had suddenly wheeled upon them with a face so like a fiend's that the four of them shrunk back aghast; but he contented himself with a loathing gesture as they were led away, merely muttering to himself: "Numbers two, three, four, five! The long score is beginning to make a show."

"Oh, daddy!" wailed out Eva at this juncture; "I can't stand the pain of it no more."

And, with the blood gushing through the fingers that were pressed over her shoulder-hurt, she fell fainting to the ground.

Pallid with apprehension, Niel had the child in his arms in an instant.

Followed by Westcott and Merrydew, he carried Eva into the house, where she was speedily under the tender and sympathetic ministrations of both Mrs. and Miss Carlingford, who, as a matter of course, supposed her to be a boy.

A mere flesh-wound in the shoulder had been sustained, but the little sufferer had lost much blood, and was very weak, though she had once more bravely rallied.

"I saw him fall the first time, from my post at the window," said Mrs. Carlingford. "But, as he at once got up again, I supposed he had simply been frightened. Frightened, indeed! Why, the child is a little hero!" And she went on with bandaging the wound, whose bleeding had at last been stanching, with motherly solicitude.

Merrydew, it should be mentioned, had contented himself from the first with taking a back seat, both literally and figuratively. He remained unobtrusively seated in the background, gravely observant, and hardly recognized as yet by any one, but evidently with a quiet determination to stay—or not to be—"frozen out," as the saying is.

Miss Carlingford, who had altogether recovered her nerve and spirits, was animatedly relating her sensations while undergoing her ordeal.

"You have reason to be proud of your achievement, miss," said Detective Westcott. "Not one woman in ten thousand could have stood it out as you did. It was a triumph of pure moral courage. More than once I trembled lest your dissimulation would give way under the strain, especially—" he paused abruptly.

Miss Carlingford colored.

"I understand," she said. "Poor Miss Liscomb! Who would have dreamed—However, she shall not lose her place, if mamma thinks as I do."

Here an exclamation of astonishment from Mrs. Carlingford attracted every one's attention to her.

In manipulating the child's shoulder, she had inadvertently bared more of the delicate white flesh than was necessary, and now sat wonderingly pointing at a tiny but perfectly outlined and peculiar birth-mark just under the shoulder-blade.

Her daughter saw it, and hurriedly approached, murmuring: "The identical mark borne by our poor little lost Elsie!"

Then they both looked curiously from the child to MacWalters.

"You say her—his name is Evelyn?" demanded the elder lady.

"I call him thus, certainly," was the rather embarrassed reply.

"And he is your adopted child?"

"Certainly, ma'm?" less diffidently.

"Oh, Mr. MacWalters!" and Miss Carlingford also clasped her hands to second the intensity of her mother's words; "if this little boy were only a little girl!"

"What *can* you mean, ma'm? And what if he were a girl?"

"Ah, sir! then for a surety would it be one of our lost ones found—my lost little granddaughter—my poor daughter Gertrude's only child, Elsie Ashner—ruthlessly stolen from her nurse's side when three years old, and never heard of since!"

MacWalters might have been startled into confessing the truth as to the child's sex, for Eva's sake, but for a strangely eager and astonished look that he remarked at that moment upon Merrydew's face.

"I deeply regret that it might not be otherwise, ma'm," was all he could say.

And then he took Eva—who had heard and comprehended everything with great but well-controlled wonder—under his own immediate charge, and, while readjusting her little jacket, glanced at Westcott, as an intimation that it might be well to intrude no longer on the privacy of the house.

But at this juncture Mr. Merrydew stepped forward.

He spoke to the ladies with a profound

humility, and yet with a certain impressive dignity that was not without its charm, for he was a fine-looking man when at his best.

"I confess myself as the writer of the anonymous warning," said he. "Notwithstanding that I have unfortunately been regarded as the enemy of this house—a misconception which I promise to have completely removed in the course of time—dare I hope that to-night's events may have somewhat, if never so slightly, reinstated me in your confidence, ladies?"

Both mother and daughter looked embarrassed and troubled.

But that he had not been ordered out of their presence on the instant was in itself an advantage, of which he did not neglect to avail himself.

He went on speaking with consummate eloquence and plausibility.

His knowledge of Holdover's plot was explained with an air of probability, his own motives candidly confessed to have been almost wholly inspired by a desire to effect a reconciliation with his half-brother's family; and finally to the mystified astonishment of the detectives, he was actually permitted to raise the ladies' hands successively to his lips in bidding them an impressive *au revoir*.

But he narrowly escaped a fatal over-reaching of his object at the end.

"*Au revoir*, my friends, my dear friends," said he, at the last. "You spoke of Gertrude's missing child. From this moment I dedicate myself to the task of restoring the little Elsie to your bosoms—I swear it! My search shall be indefatigable, my energy little short of superhuman. In less than a month's time I shall have returned the lost Elsie Ashner to your hearts!"

Both mother and daughter regarded him with clasped hands and glistening eyes; but the indignation of MacWalters could no longer be restrained.

"This is simply monstrous!" he exclaimed. "What, ladies! is it possible that you will even listen patiently to the speciousness of this consummate hypocrite? Know, then, that he was not only the stealer of your missing darling, but also the source of the diabolical plot by which William Carlingford became a fugitive and an outcast! He gloatingly admitted as much to Holdover himself in the hearing of my companion and myself."

"That is the truth," said Westcott.

Mrs. and Miss Carlingford were simply horrified; but Merrydew, to use an expressive figure of speech, had not turned a hair, beyond the look of supreme and dazed amazement that had come into his face.

"This is simply preposterous!" said he, with a deprecating laugh. "Neither detectives nor detectives' spies are after insane men, or—but this charge is too absolutely, stupendously insensate for a passing consideration! Ladies, once more I lay my services, my devotion, my very life at your feet!"

And once more, almost before they were aware of it, he had kissed their hands, after which he took his leave, with a stately and sarcastic bow for the express enlightenment of the two men.

Mrs. Carlingford had turned pale, and it was quite evident that the successive excitements of the night had at last proved too much for her.

"Do call again, gentlemen, when we shall have become more composed," entreated the younger lady, hurrying to her mother's aid. "Believe us, we are deeply grateful for your extraordinary services, and shall be even more so, most likely, when we come to more fully understand them."

Westcott and MacWalters stood not upon the order of their going, but went at once, the latter partly carrying the *pseudo* Evelyn, who was still weak from the loss of blood.

A thick fog was beginning to mantle everything as they issued out into the chill early morning air.

A familiar figure loomed through the mist, approaching from the park-side opposite, and Silas Wiener made his accustomed bow of ceremonious obsequiousness to his superior.

"Hallo!" exclaimed MacWalters; "I had altogether forgotten you, Silas."

"Truly, Mr. MacWalters," was the composed reply. "But Silas never forgets himself."

"No need to say that. But have you been lurking over yonder all night, in accordance with my instructions?"

"Candor, sir, compels me to acknowledge that the heroic devotion of Boy that stood on the Burning Deck was not strictly emulated by me. In other words, I am just back from a temporary desertion of my post."

"Where have you been?"

"Taking a surreptitious airing behind a backney-coach—and elsewhere."

MacWalters flushed with pleasure.

"What! did you really shadow the two men who drove off after the fight?"

"I took the liberty, your Highness."

"Liberty? It was a highly creditable stroke, my man! What did you discover?"

Wiener handed over a large, closely-written card, which he styled his report, to be read and digested at convenience.

Niel dropped a dollar into his hand, to which

Westcott added another, and the odd character, with an odd bow of old-time courtesy, disappeared in the fog, which was now mixing with rain.

Indeed, the weather was so disagreeable, with such a chance of its having a bad effect upon the wounded girl, that the two men were glad to hail a hackman who at that moment came driving slowly along the avenue.

CHAPTER XXI.

A MYSTERIOUS FELLOW-PASSENGER—GROWLER ALLEY.

THE driver of the hack seemed to hesitate, and another drove up to the sidewalk.

"I'd like to take you, gents," said he, when told of the two men's respective destinations, but there's a fare already aboard, to be taken a dozen blocks, an' he might discommode you."

He made a significant gesture, indicating that the fare referred to was both intoxicated and sleepy.

"We won't mind that," said Westcott, and in a moment the three were comfortably installed within.

As the coach was driving rapidly away, all they could make out of their stranger fellow-passenger was that he was a large man, in a rough coat and fur cap, who seemed to be fast asleep, with folded arms and his head bowed on his breast.

His heavy breathing almost amounted to a snore.

"He'll do," observed Westcott. "Suppose you take a look at Silas Wiener's report, if that coach-lamp will help you out."

MacWalters, still holding Eva in his lap, managed to decipher the following, which he read out aloud:

"Coach brought up at livery stable, corner 127th street and Ninth avenue, where it had probably been hired for the occasion. Driver and swell separated, after the latter had paid liveryman the blunt, former going up, latter down, the avenue. Let former slide and shadowed latter. He legged it to rocks and bro' en country junction Eleventh avenue and 116th street, where he knocked at door of lonely white cottage on high rock. Cottage has reddish blinds. Door open d by gaunt but good-looking woman, carrying a lighted candle. Seemed startled at seeing swell, who said something in a low voice, and was then admitted. No'ing more. Couldn't inspect house at short range. Big dog, which had seemed to know swell.

"What do you think of it?" asked MacWalters.

"Time to think more of it after we've both had a good sleep," was the reply.

"That is my opinion. To tell the truth, I'm not only worn out, but half bewildered."

"My case exactly. By the way, Mac, why didn't you declare the true sex of the kid at that critical moment in the drawing-room? It might have been the making of the girl."

"Do you suppose I didn't see that? But I dared not—there was a sudden look in Merrydew's face that froze back the truth from my lips, I could scarcely tell why. Didn't you remark it?"

"No; I was too much engrossed in the ladies' agitation. What was it like?"

"A sort of eager, wolfish look, that recalled forcibly all we have learned of the villainy and danger in the man. But, hallo!"

The vehicle had come to a sudden and lurching stop at a sidewalk.

"No, 87 East Eighty-eighth street!" sharply called out the hackman. "Are you wide enough awake, sir, to open the door for yourself? My horses are restless."

"Eh? eh? Oh, yes!" grunted the big man, rousing himself with a start.

And he forthwith lumbered out into the fog, slamming the door shut behind him.

But just as the horses were whipped up again, he turned, affording a glimpse of his face to his late companions.

"Good Lord!" exclaimed MacWalters.

"What a horrible face!" cried the detective, fairly startled out of his wonted composure.

"Did it remind you of Merrydew's?"

"Yes and no. It might have been his, after a dip in the burning lake of the Inferno. Its horribleness haunts me yet!"

"The same way with me. It can't possibly be, think you, that the Rook himself—"

Here there was a terrific explosion, as though the ground was being torn to pieces under the very wheels, and it seemed that the end of all things was come.

When MacWalters came to his senses he was standing out in the foggy streets, comparatively unharmed, but terribly shaken up, and with Eva, who had been in a drowse, clinging to his neck in an agony of weakness and trepidation.

Westcott was critically examining the wreck of the coach, some paces distant, while the driver, seated on a fragment of the box-seat still adhering to the fore-axle, was roaring with curses while endeavoring to subdue the capers of the panic-stricken horses.

The vehicle had literally been rent apart, the hind wheels and most of the running gear being knocked to pieces.

At last the coachman, having made the animals fast, came running back.

"Holy smoke!" he yelled, fairly tearing his hair as he danced about the wreck; "it must have been a torpedeer, an' that big galoot what pretended to be so drunk an' sleepy slipped it under the seat—I'll bet my head on it!"

"Very likely," said Westcott, "and, fortunately for us, a dynamite torpedo, at that. See; its force was downward and outward, instead of upward, as would have been the case with gun-cotton or giant powder. We've had a lucky escape."

The coachman continued to rave and swear, when the alarming state of Eva roused MacWalters to the necessity of taking her home without delay.

Accordingly they paid the unhappy driver their fares, just as if he had fairly earned them—and it certainly wasn't his fault that he had not—and, after giving him their names, together with some good advice, made the best of their way to the nearest Elevated Railway station.

"Of course," said Westcott, "there would be no use seeking the scoundrel at the address where he quitted us."

"Of course not," coincided Niel. "A mere blind for the driver, while speculating on the fog and the consequent chances of making us his fellow-passengers!"

"Could it have been Merrydew in disguise?"

"You are as wise as I, my friend."

"Or the Rook himself?"

"Ah, don't speak of it! The thought of such a possibility, without our having laid him by the heels, is more than I can stand."

As they were separating on the car, MacWalters having a little further down-town to go than the detective, the latter took a parting look at Eva.

"There may be danger for the girl hereafter," whispered he, significantly. "Should you deem it advisable, Mac, don't hesitate to bring her to my home. She might be safer with my wife and me."

MacWalters nodded appreciatively.

But on reaching home, Eva was already found to be rallying encouragingly; and the next day she had so far recovered as to laugh at both her wound and her fright, though the former was a thing that Niel was too wise to neglect.

As they had retired but little before sunrise, it was afternoon before they arose to the requirements of the new day.

Niel was hurrying with the breakfast, in order to confer with Westcott at the earliest opportunity, when there was a summons at the lower door.

It proved to be Silas Wiener.

"Well, what is it now?" demanded MacWalters, after ushering the fellow up-stairs.

Besides being newly shaved, Silas had a generally well-fed and comparatively prosperous appearance, that was in better keeping than usual with his pinchbeck urbanity and philosophical air.

"Big row in Growler Alley," he suavely replied, while nodding agreeably to Eva and warming his hands over the stove.

"What is that to me?"

"Bob Mint is into it."

"Oh!"

"He's nearly killed his girl, Kitty Floss, and now Blotchy Mag (Crachitt's wife) and he are holding the fort against the perlice."

MacWalters cut short the discussion of the meal he was attacking, and straightway began preparing for the street, his eyes sparkling and the iron look hardening into his face.

"What is wanted of the pair of 'em?" he asked.

"The cops have scented swag that Bob, Blotchy and Kitty have been hiding away for the smelting-pot. The three of 'em, including Crachitt, made it all in an hour's sneak-thieving last week."

"Anything more?"

"Bob's holding his garret with a big ax, Blotchy's backing him with a revolver, and the perlice don't know how to take 'em."

"Well, they may get a pointer or two from me. Anything else?"

"Both Bob and Blotchy are crazy-drunk, swearing that Crachitt himself must have given 'em away."

"Ah, they're out there, I fancy. Remain here with Eva till my return, Silas; and don't admit any one in my absence under any circumstances."

"Trust in me, my lord."

"She'll give you a cup of coffee and a bite if you wish. By-by, my pet! Don't forget"—in a whisper to the girl—"the revolver under your pillow, and be very, very circumspect."

The fog had come on again, and was hastening the shadows of twilight over Paradise Corners, as the reformed criminal made his appearance at Growler Alley, which was only a block away.

A crowd of evil-looking men and women, boys and young girls, was gathered at the entrance of the alley, or court, incidental to the disturbance that was going on at the top of one of the tall, filthy tenements, where Bob Mint was defying the officers.

A sudden hush fell upon them as MacWalters approached, and covert looks of mingled hatred and fear were cast at the man who was even by

this time so generally recognized as the sworn enemy and relentless sleuth-hound of their set.

But there is this paradox in fear—that he is most likely to inspire it in others who has none himself.

For all their black looks and bated breaths, the vicious crowd parted as if under compulsion, to admit of the young man's entrance into the court, and he paid no more attention to them than if they had been so many foul sticks, clods and stones.

At the reeking hall-way entrance, however, a big, beetle-browed ruffian, known as Biter Magee, with a raw-boned, evil-eyed slattern, probably his wife, at his back, made bold to dispute the passage.

"Look here, Niel," he threateningly growled; "you're not going up there to help the cops ag'in' Mint."

"You say so, Biter."

"Yes, an' I mean it!" with a furious oath.

"An' it was you, too, what handed over Crachitt last evening, as we all know, an' have got it in fer you! An', by Jingo, if you think you're going to play the same game on Bob Mint—"

At that instant he went down under a tremendous blow between the eyes from the Avenger's sledge-hammer fist, while the gaunt woman, in rushing to her bully's assistance, was as suddenly whirled out into the court headforemost on the senseless body of her lord, amid a sort of roar from the spectators.

MacWalters had coolly passed on without further interruption.

At the top-floor passage, which was crowded with a miscellaneous ruck of men, women and children, he found two officers trying to coax into submission the ruffianly Bob Mint, who stood defiant at the half-open door of his roost-den, as it might be called, ax in hand.

He was desperate with drink and rage. Peering over his shoulder from behind, revolver in hand, and loading the air with her Billingsgate, was Blotchy Mag, even more desperate-looking than himself. And behind them both occasional glimpses were afforded of the senseless and trampled form of the unfortunate shoplifter, Kitty Floss, motionless on the disordered floor.

A begrimed skylight over the passage lent its light to the hideous scene, and the mob in the entry and at the head of the stairs were yelling themselves hoarse with guying the besiegers and encouraging the besieged.

"Don't shoot," said MacWalters, for one of the officers, out of all patience, was reaching for his revolver just as Niel put in an appearance. "I'll see you through with it."

Mint was observed to hesitate a little for the first time at the appearance of the Avenger, which, however, caused Blotchy Mag to at once burst into a blood-bungering yell.

"The traitor! the pious, gospel-grinding, hypocritical hound!" she shrieked, with a shuddering string of oaths and expletives; "it was he that floored my Crachitt last night, and chucked him to the cops, like a bloody bone to the wolves. Cowards, all of you, that you would let him come up the stairs alive. But this is for his black heart, anyway!"

Her leveled weapon cracked, but she was a poor shot at best, besides being half-blinded with fury, and the bullet flew wide of its mark, only to find a lodgment in the leg of one of the mob on the landing behind, who went down forthwith on all-fours, cursing not only Blotchy Mag herself, but pretty much everything else under the sun.

But instantly was the revolver cocked and leveled again, this time more steadily, with Bob Mint's brawny shoulder as a rest.

There was a counter-movement on the part of the Avenger, so rapidly as to be scarcely followed, and the crack of his own revolver had forestalled the second attempt on his life.

The result of the shot was hardly less incredible than the rapidity of its delivery.

With no harm to Mint, and little more to the unsexed virago than a temporary paralysis of the hand, the weapon flew, useless and broken, out of her grasp, its own discharge in falling simply wounding another of the staircase contingent in the foot.

When the smoke cleared away, MacWalters had disappeared, the officers alone catching a glimpse of his feet as he vanished out of a window that overlooked the alley below, besides communicating with the garret den by a rather shaky ladder along the outside wall.

CHAPTER XXII.

A HOME-SURPRISE.

BUT the mob in the court, seventy feet below, were speedily made aware of this dangerous flank movement on the part of MacWalters, and a roar of yells and curses and threats greeted his appearance on the perilous ladder.

But the latter saw that a platoon of police was already moving into the crowded alley, with brandishing clubs, though, even without that intervention, he would not have lost a jot of his composure.

The entire locality and its purlieus was as well known to him as to any one of its criminal denizens, and once before had he successfully undertaken this same perilous enterprise, to ef-

cape from the lawful authorities he was now bent on aiding.

In a moment or two he had crept along the tottering ledge, and gained a firm hold upon the window belonging to the garret in which the desperate man and woman were at bay.

Then, to crush in the sash, precipitate himself into the room, and fall unexpectedly upon them in the rear, was the work of but another instant.

Mag wheeled with a yell, but only to be tossed against the wall with stunning force, while Mint had nary time to wrestle for the possession of the ax, as it was being torn out of his frenzied grip.

But he was not long in feeling that he was in the clutch of one who was his superior.

"You're a mean hound, Mac!" he growled, as he was fast being overcome. "Ain't you got no kind of mercy on an old pal like me?"

"None, none whatever, until you and your gang are hounded into State Prison or off the face of the earth!" hissed the Avenger between his gnashing teeth. "Hound? Yes, that in truth I am, Bob Mint—a bloodhound for you and yours to the end of time! Cowardly curl such mercy as my Mary and her baby got from you shall you receive from me, and no more, no less!"

The criminal shuddered, and gave up the struggle, without further demur.

In a few minutes he and the two women—it being found that the unconscious Kitty Floss had undergone a brutal but not fatal beating—were in custody, while the police also secured the concealed plunder that was sufficient evidence to convict the trio to long terms of imprisonment.

So deadly was the satisfaction glinting in MacWalters's eyes as they were led off to jail that even Blotchy Mag shrunk from it, while Kitty, who had been revived for the occasion, trembled like a leaf as she cowered close to one of the policemen's side.

"I didn't help to hunt down Mary!" she murmured. "Take them eyes off me Mac—they burn like coals of fire! I swear I wouldn't have hurted neither Molly nor the kid, Rook or no Rook!"

The Avenger merely smiled.

"I'm surely in luck!" he thought. "These three make the offset in the long score stand eight, and all in less than twenty-four hours. Yes; surely—I'm in luck."

Let it be stated just here that his vengeance, so far as those eight members of the Rook's gang were concerned, was finally accomplished.

At the ensuing trials, the Rook dared not interpose the slightest assistance through secretly engaged lawyers or other agents, as had heretofore chiefly been the case—his own situation being by this time too precarious for any thought save of his own continued security.

Conviction was secured in every case, and, as the prisoners all chanced to be old offenders, heavy sentences were pronounced.

Having secured those important captures to the police, MacWalters lost no time in hurrying back to his quarters, where, however, a disagreeable surprise was in store for him.

The fog and dusk had thickened down with choking density when he reached the distillery door, which, to his astonishment and alarm, he found open.

Filled with vague forebodings, he hurried up the dark stairways, and presently came upon the half-senseless body of Silas Wiener extended across the second-story landing.

One of Niel's recent acquisitions was an electric scarf-pin which he could cause to shoot forth an illuminating ray at pleasure.

Bringing this curious ornament into requisition, he was enabled to recognize the fallen man in the dark, and perceive the blackening results of a crashing blow between the eyes, by which his prostration had been effected.

"Wake up, Silas!" he muttered, shaking him roughly by the shoulder.

There was no response till he bethought himself of a flask of spirits which he invariably carried on his person, to meet just such an emergency as this one, though he had never in his own case broken the fatal abstinence pledge that had accompanied his vow of vengeance upon the gang.

An application of the flask to Wiener's lips now acted like magic. The fellow rose into a sitting posture with his eyes bulging out of his head.

"Speak! what has happened?" demanded Niel, in a frenzy of suspense. "Don't dare to tell me that Eva has been carried off!"

"She can't have been yet," was the reply, accompanied by an ineffectual grab at the flask. "I warned her with a yell just as I was knocked out by a huge figure bounding up-stairs in the dark, and that would have given her time to lock herself in her room. For God's sake, MacWalters, just one more pull at that delightful bottle."

Niel's answer was to rudely spurn him to one side, for a feeble call for help had at that instant floated down from above.

With a shout of encouragement he darted onward and upward with long, panther-like leaps. Long and intelligent practice in his previous

criminal career had enabled MacWalters to cultivate his eyesight up to an exceptional proficiency of distinguishing the outlines of objects in anything but pitch-black darkness with extraordinary accuracy.

While bounding up the last flight he perceived a towering figure, with a struggling burden in its arms, pause hesitatingly at the top landing, and then leap away along the great empty store-room, in which corner the living-rooms were partitioned off.

Instantly divining its object, which was to gain the roof by a trap and step-ladder at the further end of this great room, and thence communicate with adjoining tall roofs, whence the street might be reached, the Avenger was instantly in pursuit.

The fugitive had gained the top of the ladder, and burst open the trap by a single heave of his powerful frame—which seemed little short of gigantic in the gloom—by the time his pursuer had reached the foot of it.

Here, however, being so hot pressed, he dropped his burden, with a muttered execration, and, as MacWalters caught it in his arms, Eva's well-known caress was folded about his neck.

"Are you hurt, my darling?"

"No, daddy: only squeezed and out of breath."

"Quick, then; get your pistol and stand guard right at this spot."

And then MacWalters had bounded up the ladder so swiftly as to grab the fugitive by one of his disappearing feet, for the latter had been unexpectedly impeded an instant by the wreck of the broken trap-door.

This giant struggled and kicked to relieve himself, but Niel hung on like the crab at the heel of Hercules.

Not only that, but, drawing his clasp-knife with his left hand and opening it with his teeth, he plunged it, hilt-deep, into the fellow's leg, making such a deep downward slit in withdrawing it that a boot-leg was cut down to the instep and the entire boot torn from the foot; though even then, with the knife again between his teeth, he recovered his grip higher up, where he continued to hang on like grim death, hoping to retain his hold until Eva should return with her revolver, inasmuch as he found it impossible to get his hand into his hip-pocket at the moment.

But at this juncture the ruffian, seeming to bethink himself for the first time of his own pistol, produced one, and blazed away straight down into the trap-hole at his most tenacious but hardly visible foe.

The ball only buried itself harmlessly into the ladder, and simultaneously a lucky tug at the imprisoned leg caused the weapon to fly out of his hand and fall through the trap, striking MacWalters a smart rap on the head in its descent.

Here Eva was heard running back from the living rooms.

"Shoot, Eva, shoot!" cried MacWalters. "Quick! here is his leg. Or give me the pistol!"

But Eva had already fired, and apparently with some effect, for there was a howl of rage, and then the ruffian came tumbling down the ladder so unexpectedly as to bear Niel down with his huge weight, and pinion him to the floor.

Instantly a long knife glistened in the ruffian's hand.

But at this juncture Eva fired again, excitedly and at random, but so fortunately as to shiver the blade that was already descending upon her protector's body.

Gnashing his teeth, the marauder again sprung to his feet and up the ladder.

But MacWalters was once more close at his heels, and succeeded in grasping his other leg, so tenaciously, indeed, that the foot covering of this one also came off in his hands, though not until he had secured a yet tighter grip higher up.

A frenzy of fear now seemed to be added to the ruffian's frenzy of rage.

"Idiot!" he snarled, resuming his struggles with tenfold energy; "do you realize that it is the Rook himself that you are tackling?"

But if any announcement on earth could have gifted the Avenger with a courage and strength bordering on the superhuman, it was this one that had doubtless been meant to strike terror to his soul.

He uttered a wild, grateful shout, and began to climb up the man's leg and body, as if suddenly provided with hands of iron and hooks of steel.

But at the same instant the latter hurled himself out at full length on the rather steeply-sloping roof, dragging the other after him.

MacWalters released his hold solely for the purpose of closing with his antagonist more effectually; and then, as they momentarily stood erect, despite the evident disparity in their size and strength, he locked with him in a desperate grapple to the death.

It was, indeed, to all appearances, a struggle nothing short of that—to the death.

For an instant they hung together in a fierce, wrestling fight for the mastery.

Then they thundered down in a dog-fall, side by side, on the shingles.

Then Eva, on peeping over the edge of the trap, uttered a shriek of despair.

Her protector and his enemy were rolling swiftly, over and over, down the precipitous roof, locked in each other's arms.

CHAPTER XXIII.

FACE TO FACE WITH THE ROOK.

It was a terrible situation.

But good-luck continued to befriend MacWalters.

Just before reaching the giddy verge, two or three of the shingles, loosened by wind and weather, were torn loose by one of his revolving clutches, enabling him to secure a desperate grip on one of the furring strips beneath.

He held on in spite of the wrenching received at the next lurch of the huge body fastened to his own.

The shock, however, only served to tear them apart, and the mysterious desperado at the same instant disappeared over the fatal brink.

The distillery building was fully eighty feet high, from cornice to pavement.

Breathless, and half-bewildered, with a strange, fierce joy, MacWalters cautiously approached the cornice on his hands and knees, and peered over and down.

He fully expected (and, let us not deny it, hoped no less) to see his antagonist, whom he now could not doubt to have been his arch-enemy, the dreaded Rook himself, lying, a crushed and mangled mass, on the sidewalk far below, perhaps faintly writhing in the light of the street-lamp that was directly in front of the building.

But he was woefully disappointed.

In lieu of this, a horrible face, so distorted with rage as to seem scarcely human, glared up at him from less than a dozen feet below the cornice.

It was the face of his late antagonist, who had been so fortunate as to seize and cling to one of the half-open iron shutters of the next to the top floor, whence an inconsiderable exertion of his vast strength could not fail to enable him to reach the interior.

"Niel MacWalters!" hoarsely called out the villain, "you, and you alone, have engaged in a personal struggle with the Rook, and yet live to tell the tale. But deceive yourself not. He will yet hound you down to death even more surely than were your wife and child before you at his remorseless behest! Farewell till then! Even Merrydew's chicken-heartedness, should love once more enslave and soften him, shall not be permitted to plead in your behalf!"

With that he swung himself inward on the shutter, obtained a sufficient foothold on the window-ledge, kicked through the flimsy sash and panes, and disappeared within.

For the first time in years, tears—tears of rage and mortification—gushed from Niel MacWalters's eyes.

What! and had the Rook—the invisible, the ubiquitous, the mysterious, the indomitable Rook—been already in his, the sworn Avenger's, power, only to slip out of it again, comparatively uninjured?

But he made the best of his way back to the trap, seeing that there might be still time for the Rook to be once more beforehand with him in the matter of Eva.

But no; Eva was still waiting for him at the trap opening, and, on their reaching the foot of the ladder once more, they could hear the fugitive running limpingly down the stairs, flight after flight, in his stocking feet, after which the street-door far below was heard to slam.

"No need of further pursuit at present," grumbled MacWalters. "We are too near Paradise Corners to have a ghost of a chance of running him down. Come, my dear! We will gather up what trophies may be found on the battle-field, and then you shall tell me the story of your peril and your escape. Much as I shall hate to part from you, this is no longer a fit place for your abode."

He again pressed the wire connected with his electric scarf-pin, and together they picked up the relics of the battle by its sparkling gleam.

These consisted of the ruffian's two boots, his revolver—a superb seven-shooter, with richly-carved ebony butt—and both blade and hilt of the poniard that had been shattered by the child's lucky bullet.

The poniard was the rarest and most significant trophy of all.

On the blade being pieced together, it proved, hilt and steel, to be no poniard at all, in the strict meaning of the word, but a magnificent Malay creese, the exact counterpart of the one already in Niel's possession, save that, in lieu of a topaz, there was set a splendid amethyst in the head.

"This will do for once," muttered MacWalters, knitting his brows. "Another puzzle for Westcott, no less than for myself, or I am mistaken."

There was nothing else beyond a quantity of blood, which had poured from the stab and perhaps another wound in the desperado's leg, tracks of which were also found subsequently on the stairways.

Niel and Eva returned to the top landing and called to Silas Wiener, who was presently heard

stirring near the spot where he had been found lying.

"Double bolt the street-door, and then come up here," commanded Niel.

"I don't know about that, your Majesty," Silas wincingly called up, in return. "Is the danger all over?"

"Yes."

"Any more whisky in that flask?"

"Not a drop for you, you scoundrell!" roared MacWalters. "Obey me, or I'll know the reason why you don't!"

They heard him bolt the door as directed, and presently, after they had returned to their cheerful sitting-room fire, he put in a woe-begone appearance, with his dusty garments and his two blackened eyes, but licking his chops and smacking his lips suggestively, for all that.

Silas placed one hand impressively on his stomach and the other at the back of his head, and began to whine about his sense of "gone-ness" generally, when his glance alighted on the rich creese-hilt lying on the table, when he suddenly forgot his complaints.

"By the wealth of Pluto!" he exclaimed, pouncing on the article and inspecting it with sparkling eyes; "but that is a glorious jewel! Holy Moses! what mightn't a fellow raise on that at Simpson's?"

MacWalters sternly motioned him to drop the trophy, and then demanded his detailed account of what had taken place during his absence.

Silas complied, though his story was substantially little more than he had already outlined.

Eva's was likewise very brief.

There had come a pounding knock on the entrance, and Silas, at Eva's request, had gone down to ascertain the cause. It had been burst open before he could reach the bottom, with the consequences to himself as stated. Eva had not exactly understood the significance of his warning shout, but, not apprehending danger, had lingered at the top landing till the powerful figure of the intruder, bounding up toward her in the gathering dusk had filled her with such terror that she had only time to dart into the living rooms, but not enough to lock and bolt the door behind her.

The next instant he was in the rooms pursuing her like a madman. There was no opportunity for her to secure her pistol, or do anything else but to flee and dodge her pursuer, whose face (which she described as very swarthy and altogether the most hideous she had ever seen or dreamed of) had terrified her so greatly as to lend wings to her speed and her agility, which for a long time baffled his persistent, yet comparatively unwieldy pursuit. At last, however, she had been overtaken, and caught up in the arms of the giant, who was in the act of carrying her off, without a word of explanation, when MacWalters's providential return had interrupted and finally foiled his design.

Having heard and digested his *protegee's* story, MacWalters placed a coin in Wiener's hand, and sent him about his business, with the intimation no more pay would be forthcoming unless some signal voluntary service should again call for a spontaneous loosening of the purse-strings.

"This won't last me no time at all, your Highness, what with my eyes to be doctored and the chronic aridity in my gullet," pleaded the fellow on being let out at the street-door by his master, and he rather contemptuously regarded the half-dollar in his hand. "Give me a tip as to the sort of voluntary service your Highness might find acceptable."

"Try the white cottage with the red blinds," said MacWalters after a pause. "You've the entire night before you, Silas."

And, with that he unceremoniously shut the door in his face.

"Eva, my dear," said MacWalters, a little later, when the frugal meal had been dispatched. "Make one bundle of your clothes and little belongings with the least possible delay. I must take you to a safer home than this can ever be for you."

The sweet eyes brimmed with tears, and she was on the point of crying.

"Oh, Daddy Mac!" she murmured; "you won't send me away from you."

"Only to a securer home than this, my love, where I can often visit you," he replied, embracing her. "My poor child, do you think I shall not feel the change as much as yourself? Don't argue now, and make me feel bad, but run along."

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE WHITE COTTAGE WITH THE RED BLINDS.

"MAC, my man," said Detective Westcott, after Eva had been tenderly received in his good wife's sheltering arms, "of course the poor child is welcome to a home under my humble roof, and I shall watch over her security as over one of my own. But why not have an explanation with the Carlingford ladies concerning her at once?"

"I must wait, Westcott," was the reply.

"But why, man? Isn't there more than a chance of her proving to be their missing relative?"

"Yes."

"And in that case, wouldn't it be immensely for the child's benefit?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Then why do you hesitate?"

"I'm only doing so temporarily, and that for Eva's safety."

Westcott stared.

"Of course," he said, "she will be safer here with my wife and me than she could be with you in the top of that dreary distillery building, after your terrible experience with the Rook, as you have just related to me. But—"

"And with the Carlingford ladies she would be immeasurably less safe at the present time."

"Are you sure?"

"Why, man alive, I know it! Have you forgotten all we know about Merrydew, his self-exposed character, his antecedents, his designs, and—last but not least—the conciliating impression, even in the teeth of opposing facts, that he is already beginning to make upon mother and daughter, till it seems nothing sort of fatuity?"

"True. Then you think the Rook to have been working in Merrydew's interest in tonight's attempted abduction of the girl."

"Undoubtedly, and so must you, when you think it over."

"Perhaps so."

"Are you fully recuperated?"

"Oh, yes."

"What, then, is your programme for tonight?"

"I had thought—"

"Of the rock-perched white cottage with the red blinds?"

"Exactly; and after that, if there should be time, a visit to the Carlingfords."

"My views precisely! But let us understand each other perfectly beforehand."

"Certainly."

"Do you contemplate Holdover's arrest, in case we shall corner him?"

"Not at once, unless the ladies shall first see fit to swear out a warrant—which is not likely. You know their shrinking dread of last night's affair becoming public."

"Of course. Though, apart from that, we have ample evidence for the arrest of both Merrydew and Holdover on your own responsibility."

"I know that. But the chief is informed of everything, and says to go on for fresh developments and wait."

"Ah!"

"But hold on. I had nearly forgotten something for you, Mac."

"For me?"

Westcott produced a small morocco case, opened it to the revelation of a shining silver badge, with the initials "S. A.," engraved thereon, which he handed to his companion.

"For me?" stammered MacWalters again.

"What are the initials for?"

"Secret Agent," as a matter of course.

"Who is the badge from?"

"From our chief, Inspector Byrnes, in recognition of your trustworthiness. He is tickled to death over your numerous services, wants you to wear that as a semi-official representative of his authority, and thinks your evolution into a regular detective officer but a question of time."

The ex-thief flushed with extreme pleasure.

"I scarcely hoped for such a recognition—at least, not so soon," he muttered. "Pray thank the inspector in my name, my friend. I shall wear this emblem with honor to myself, and credit to the Department."

And he pinned the badge upon his person after the detective custom, so that it might be displayed at pleasure.

Westcott seemed to enjoy his gratification, whose secret nature he could thoroughly appreciate, almost as much as he did himself.

"Didn't I tell you, in the old criminal and unhappy days, Niel MacWalters," he exclaimed, cordially grasping the other's hand, "that there was a mine of good and usefulness in you, only waiting to crop out, and be recognized, if you would let it?"

"Yes, and you were right," was the feeling response. "Thank God! for the turn things have taken, Westcott—thank God! thank God!"

"Come now." And the detective rose from the table at which they had been conversing. "Let us see what is to be made out of the little white cottage with the red blinds."

"Silas Wiener should already have preceded us thither," observed MacWalters imitating his example.

When they reached their destination, the night, though it was now in the middle of April, had turned off frosty, though there was still more or less of fog and heaviness in the air.

It was a lonely part of the suburbs, the streets being unfinished, and the few houses in sight being isolated shanties scattered here and there upon and among precipitous rocks and cliffs, which had not yet succumbed to the blaster's innovating work, though they were fast going, year by year.

It was not difficult to locate the object of their visit, and, while they were reconnoitering, Silas put in an opportune appearance.

"What have you discovered?" demanded MacWalters.

"The watch-dog, for one thing," replied Silas. "He doesn't bark, not being of the barking breed, but he's there all the same."

"But you knew that much before. Nothing else?"

"Yes; the swell of last night's adventure, who was admitted by the same woman, twenty minutes ago."

"The detectives (for MacWalters can hereafter be alluded to consistently in this connection) exchanged satisfied glances.

"Now as to this watch-dog," said Niel, leading the way to the rocky path leading windingly up to the cottage from the avenue. "I used to be pretty good in the matter of dogs."

They had no sooner approached the little white-washed garden-fence surrounding the cottage—which, of course, they did with the utmost caution—than the dog, a savage-looking brindled mastiff, kenneled near the door, sprang out silently the length of his chain, showing his fangs most suggestively in the uncertain light.

"I shall get in his rear," whispered MacWalters, quietly. "In the mean time, do one of you slip over the pickets and engage the brute's attention. But wait; has either of you a stout cord?"

The cord was not forthcoming, but Westcott indicated a clothesline spanning some posts in the rear yard.

MacWalters nodded, and then, crouching, crept along under the fence, while Westcott—we may be sure it wasn't Silas—waited his opportunity, and then quietly vaulted over the pickets in the very face of the canine guardian of the place.

The dog leaped toward him the full length of his stout chain, growling ominously; but so long as he did not bay out his deep-mouthed warning no alarm was to be apprehended.

Westcott simply remained making slight but tantalizing motions toward the brute, until he perceived MacWalters stealthily approaching from behind, with the rope in a coil around his left arm.

Then he made an unmistakable step toward the cottage door.

The animal made a furious tug at his chain; but, just as he was about to thunder out his bark of warning, the reformed criminal was upon him with a panther-like spring.

The dog was a large and powerful pattern of fidelity, and for a minute there was a tremendous but silent struggle, during which Niel was chiefly intent upon both mastering and maintaining the silence of the brute.

At length his double-handed clutch on the fierce throat was secure, while he knelt with all his weight on the animal's stomach.

Then he nodded to Westcott, who at once brought into requisition the line, with which in a few minutes the dog was both muzzled and pinioned into absolute helplessness.

They had just time to thrust him back into his kennel, with his nose and head hanging out of its door in what seemed a naturally drowsy attitude in the uncertain light, and to slip out of sight when the woman stepped out of the cottage, and looked suspiciously around.

"I thought I heard something like a scuffle," said she, speaking to some one within. "What could it have been?"

She approached the kennel, whose occupant could only look up with a dolorous whine, which fortunately she accepted as signifying laziness and content.

"It was nothing—come back!" called a voice—recognized by the detective as Holdover's—from within. "How many times am I to warn you against drawing any attention to the house while I am in it?"

"Oh, don't bother, Asdrubal!" replied the woman, nevertheless returning. "I know what I am about." And she entered the cottage, closing the door with an impatient bang.

A moment later the detectives were at the one red-shuttered window through which a light was shining, Wiener remaining on guard at the fence-line.

The blinds were jealously shut, but by a careful manipulation they were sufficiently opened to afford a good view of the interior, together with a hearing of the occupants' voices.

Holdover sat before a stove, stirring a glass of punch, his face betraying several severe scratches as a reminder of Bella Liscomb's claw-like finger nails.

The woman, who had resumed some needle-work at the opposite side of the little table that was between them, had once been very beautiful, and was still comely; but a soured, discontented expression was the disagreeable characteristic of her care-worn face, and she was, moreover, just now in no enviable humor, as was evidenced by the frequent resentful looks that she cast, without any pretense of concealment, at her companion.

"Put that lotion on my face again, Lottie," Holdover presently commanded, in a peevish tone. "And you couldn't have drowned more than a teaspoonful of gin in this hot water—it's weaker than goat's milk."

"Go, then, where you got your scratches for a better dose!" snapped out the woman, neverthe-

less rising to apply the lotion and stiffen the punch. "It's so likely that the hussy would coddle you more tenderly than I do, isn't it?"

"Oh, give that a rest!" he groaned. "Am I to go over that same explanation to you forever?"

"Yes, forever and a day, before I'll believe a word of your absurd lies, Asdrubal Holdover!" And she seemed about to throw the lotion bottle at his head.

"Go to the deuce!" he growled.

The woman confronted him with a glare, and pounded on the table with her clinched hand.

"How dare you!" she cried, vehemently. "Faithless, hypocritical wretch, that you are! how dare you speak to me, your wronged and abused wife in that brutal way!"

CHAPTER XXV.

HOLDOVER'S DOMESTICITY.

THE last remark had been received as a refreshing announcement by the eavesdropping detectives.

"You force me to it," Holdover replied, doggedly. "It is nothing but nag, nag! jaw, jaw! from morning till night, whenever I come here."

"Which is seldom enough, as doubtless the hussy that scored your face for you takes precious care it shall be!" jeered the woman, plumping back angrily at her needlework. "Oh, but you are a beauty, you are!"

"I tell you again that I did not receive the scratches from a woman, but in an encounter with a drunken man."

"And I know better, tell it as often as you choose!"

"Lottie, you wrong me! What! you think me capable of consorting with a female of that kind, after having known you?"

"Molasses for fish and gravy for fruit! you're late in the day for that sort of soft sawder, my man!"

"I asked you a question."

"Oh, did you?"

"Yes; and I want to know if you really think me capable of such vulgarity."

She laughed unpleasantly.

"Vulgarity is good—decidedly good!" she sneered. "Well, then, I think you are capable of anything mean and contemptible, after the semi-desertion you have treated me to for the past five years. Thank God! the last of our pledges, that might have witnessed my humiliation, is in the graveyard." And her voice trembled.

"Oh, this is unbearable!" growled the man, reapplying the lotion with his own hands, and then finishing his punch at a gulp.

"Ah, indeed! but you have been answered."

"After a fashion."

"Oh, don't think I imagine that you were cat-clawed by the beautiful and refined Miss Carlingford, much as I might have cause to hate her!"

"You could hardly be such an utter, egregious fool as that."

"But I can do a power of thinking, Asdrubal Holdover, for all that."

"I should say so!"

"And notwithstanding that you long ago bullied a consent out of me to your bigamous marriage with that young lady—if you can get there—you haven't told me how your plot is progressing."

"Perhaps I don't intend to."

"You've got to, sooner or later."

"Oh!"

"Yes; for I shall simply insist on it."

"Insist and be hanged."

"It's you that will stretch a rope long before I shall, Asdrubal Holdover. But that isn't all of it."

"What the deuce do you mean, Lottie?"

"Simply this: That you've got to do better by me forthwith, or I shall sue you for desertion and non-support. And where would your chances for a rich bigamous marriage be then?"

Holdover made no reply, but a dangerous glitter was in his eyes.

"I suppose it wasn't enough," she went on, "that I should have consented at last to such an infamous project—a consent that would never have been given, for all your hideous threats and golden promises combined, save that our children were under the mold, and I had come to despise, if not to hate, you. Oh, no; that wasn't enough. But you must have me endure your secrecy, as well, to say nothing of the outside infidelities you may see fit to indulge in—scarcely of the sort to arouse even a wronged wife's jealousy!"

She pointed tauntingly to the scratches and furrows on his face.

Holdover ground out an oath, but still refrained from retort.

"Well, what are you going to do?" she continued, with the calmness of conscious power.

"Do?"

"Yes; are you going to be frank and open with me, or are you not? I don't mean as to the cat-clawing," contemptuously. "That for that!" she snapped her fingers. "But as to the progress of your suit with the fair and rich Carlingford."

"What do you want to know about it?" and he moved uneasily, while mixing himself a fresh tumbler of punch.

"Everything! If I'm contemptibly important enough to be an accomplice in the foul plot against the young lady's happiness and fortune, I'm good enough to know how we stand. Are you making any progress?"

"No!" with an oath; "not a bit."

"You were more hopeful a month ago—before the murder. What has happened to set you back?"

Holdover drained the hot mixture as if it were a cooling draught.

"Everything has gone wrong, nothing right," he growled. "The long and short of it is, I suppose, that Maud neither does nor can love me. The jig is about up in that quarter."

The woman dissimulated a gleam of satisfaction, if not of happy relief, that had come into her face.

"What! with all the golden dreams you were in hopes of realizing?"

"Not by a hanged sight! I shall have money in plenty, and before long, too, or—I'll know the reason why."

"That is good news, surely. By the way, hasn't your friend, Mr. Merrydew, been able to help you along in the wooing o't by his shrewd advice, as formerly?"

Holdover startled her by striking the table a tremendous blow with his fist.

"Friend the devil!" he roared, livid with rage.

"Don't mention that scoundrel's name again, if you don't want to make a madman of me!"

She looked up in unaffected amazement, after which a look of shrewd intelligence came into her face.

"All right, I sha'n't," said she, quietly. "I always feared and mistrusted the man from the very first, and warned you against him, as you must remember, Asdrubal."

"No more of him, I say!" fiercely. "If I don't have his heart's blood sooner or later, it won't be my fault!"

"Tell me something else, then, there's a good fellow."

"What do you want to know?"

"Everything or anything that isn't in the newspapers. How the Carlingford will-and-murder mystery has quieted down."

"So much the better."

"And yet so much the more mysterious! Do you think there is really any such person as the Rook?"

"Yes, I do," with an involuntary shudder.

"I wish to Heaven I didn't!"

"An awful personality, surely! What does—but I forgot I wasn't to mention his name again."

"What does he think about it, you would ask?"

Well, the Lord and he only knows, and neither of them will tell. The infernal, traitorous hound! he's far more hand-in-glove with the bloodily mysterious Rook than he pretends to be, depend upon it!"

The woman looked up expectantly, but Holdover lighted another lamp, and, saying roughly that he was going to bed, quitted the room.

The listening detectives withdrew from their post, and signaled Wiener to precede them down the path.

He did so, and, as they followed, was presently heard clamoring like a stuck pig.

His dilemma was soon made apparent.

The Holdovers were very jealous of the approaches to their domestic stronghold.

At the foot of the rocky path was a sort of snail earth-covered trench, which had been avoided by the trio, more by good luck than anything else, in the ascent.

But it was, nevertheless, a pitfall twelve inches deep, with a sort of bear-trap at the bottom, into which the unlucky Silas had suddenly stepped.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MERRYDEW'S FORESTALLING STROKE.

FOR an instant the detectives could hardly help laughing at the predicament of their occasionally tolerated associate.

Not only was one of his feet nipped fast by the trap, which was causing him no less pain than inconvenience, but a bellicose billy-goat, unexpectedly aroused from his slumbers on an adjacent point of rock, was availing himself of the opportunity to run a-tilt upon the ensnared man, whom he was butting most furiously.

But the racket that was being raised would never do.

"Hold your jaw, you idiot!" exclaimed MacWalters, under his breath. "Now stay here and make the right sort of an explanation."

And having effected Wiener's release, Niel, together with Westcott, succeeded in effecting his concealment on the opposite side of the broken-up avenue just as the woman of the cottage put in an angry appearance at the top of the path with a single-barreled shotgun in her hands.

"Here, you man! what for are you prowling about down there?" she cried, in a clear, challenging voice. "Ha! you have been caught in my trap for thieves, have you?"

"I ain't a-prowlin', ma'am," responded Silas, almost tearfully. "On the honor of an unfor-

tunate, but high-born gentleman, I ain't a-prowlin', though I have blundered inadvertently into your infernal man-trap—and may the devil fly away with it!"

"Be off now, this very instant, or I'll set my dog on you! And there's salt and pepper for your freshness, too, if you don't hurry off."

"Yes, ma'm! yes, ma'm! don't you see I'm going as fast as my broken ankle will admit? Far be it from me to dispute the silvery command of the Lady of the Rocks, or the Queen of all Shantyville herself—with a bull dog at her back." And he began to limp away.

But at this juncture the woman must have suddenly discovered the remarkable condition of her canine guardian.

"Oh, you scoundrel!" she screamed; "what have you been doing to my dog?"

"What's the matter with him, ma'm?" called back Silas. "Ain't he cut his eye-teeth yet, or does he want a bone?"

For answer her shotgun flew to her shoulder, and he incontinently took to his heels, too frightened for the moment to remember his lameness.

Crack! went the gun, the fugitive jumped a yard high, while clapping a hand to his posterior and emitting an appalling yell, and then vanished in the misty air, which was now being silvered by the rising moon.

Holdover was then heard to come out of the cottage, and join in his wife's speculations over the watchdog's predicament, and the significance thereof, upon which, however, they did not seem to come to any very satisfactory understanding.

Restraining their laughter with difficulty, the detectives waited till all was once more quiet, and then set off themselves down the avenue.

"It was a lucky accident, to rid us thus of Wiener for the time being, at all events," said MacWalters; "for I should not have known what further use to make of him to-night, and I can't afford to 'stake' him again yet awhile."

"By the way," observed Westcott, "the chief wishes you to consider yourself under pay from this time forth, and you are to report to him as regularly as the rest of us."

MacWalters expressed his thanks, though less profusely than Westcott—who sometimes lost sight of the full strength of the vengeful element in the young man's animating motives—had anticipated.

As the evening was still young the detectives decided upon a visit to Mrs. and Miss Carlingford as their next immediate step.

To their astonishment, Mr. Jacob Merrydew was descending the stoop of the Carlingford mansion as they reached it.

"Evening, gentlemen!" he greeted them, with a good-humored smile. "Still a little chilly for the season, eh?"

And he sauntered off, swinging his light cane, and with the jaunty, assured air of one well-satisfied with his visit.

The two men exchanged glances.

"He hasn't been letting his opportunities grow cold, depend upon it," commented Westcott. "But we can only judge for ourselves."

They were received by the ladies with a certain restraint, that went far to confirm an unassured feeling that had already taken possession of both visitors.

It was noticeable, however, that Mrs. Carlingford did most of the talking on her side, while the daughter, usually so affable and animated, was for the most part silent and depressed, with her eyes not unfrequently lowered, as if to avoid any search of what even their mute eloquence might betray.

"I suppose, gentlemen," said Mrs. Carlingford, after the preliminary greetings, "you are here about the adventures and mysteries of last night?"

The detectives bowed.

"We thought it only our duty," Westcott took it upon himself to reply, "to call and see whether the exposures then made have been found satisfactory or not."

"Thank you for doing so; it is very considerate of you, we are sure. Yes; everything has been found satisfactory. And Mr. Merrydew has offered certain explanations that have also proved highly gratifying."

"It is truly remarkable, ma'm," MacWalters could not help striking in with, "to see that self-confessed villain so quickly and so thoroughly restored to your confidence and esteem."

Miss Carlingford gave a sudden start, as if in half-compelled assent, but her mother drew herself up with a good deal of haughtiness, saying:

"You forget, sir, that you are speaking of a connection of my dead husband!"

"Begging your pardon, ma'm, I forget nothing of the sort. I am perfectly aware that I am speaking of an outrageous, diabolical villain, who confessed, in my hearing and that of this gentleman, that he is hand-in-glove with the mysterious criminal who stole the missing will and subsequently murdered its maker in cold blood, all in his, Merrydew's, own interest; who confessed to still having the will in his possession; who confessed, and gloried in the confession, that it was he alone who concocted the plot by which your son William became an outcast

and a wanderer, and who subsequently procured the stealing away of your grandchild, Elsie Ashner, whom he afterward abandoned among criminals, that she might die early or be transformed into a human devil, to the ultimate confusion and shame of your family."

The younger lady, though keeping her eyes cast down, appeared powerfully agitated; but, to the astonishment of both men, the elder had listened to this announcement comparatively unmoved.

Mrs. Carlingford shrugged her still shapely shoulders.

"We happen to know something of the motive for which these so-called confessions were made," she observed.

"Am I to understand, ma'm, that you mistrust my word?"

"Oh, no, Mr. MacWalters; by no means. That you really did overhear these things I do not doubt."

"Wait a moment, ma'm. My companion here, Mr. Westcott, is a straightforward, plain-speaking man—the last in the world to varnish, exaggerate or varnish a tale in the recital. Will you first permit him to relate everything we did overhear, as passing between Merrydew and Holdover, and what followed it, no less than what immediately preceded it?"

"Oh, I have no objection," with a weary gesture of assent. "Only I wish you would say Mr. Merrydew in speaking of—of my late husband's family connection."

MacWalters bowed, and Westcott forthwith made the recital that was required of him.

He omitted not a single item as to the self-confessions that had been overheard. Niel's terrible experience in the elevator-shaft that had preceded them, and the subsequent adventure among the trap-doors of the Merrydew apartments; and he even went on and described the affair of the coach torpedo, together with MacWalters's more recent adventure with the Rook himself on the distillery roof.

Miss Carlingford listened with the intensest interest, but her mother, apart from a natural horror over the personal experiences described, remained unmoved.

"You two must have powerful enemies, and the history of your narrow escapes would doubtless make a fascinating book—for a certain large class of readers," she was good enough to say. "But Mr. Merrydew has already given us the substance of what he permitted you to overhear, from excellent motives of his own."

"Permitted us to overhear?" exclaimed MacWalters, repeating the emphasis no less than the words. "Ah, the line of the estimable gentleman's explanation is apparent. He then knew we were listening, I suppose, and cunningly shaped his fictitious self-accusations for the benefit (or just punishment) of our eavesdropping selves?"

"Precisely, sir."

MacWalters arose, as did Westcott also. "This is a little too preposterous!" said he. "We shall wish you a very good-evening, ma'm," with sarcastic politeness.

"Sir! your manner is disrespectful, not to say offensive."

"I'm sorry, ma'm. Send for Merrydevil—I beg your pardon—Mr. Merrydew, to correct it."

CHAPTER XXVII.

MERRYDEW'S GAME UNFOLDS ITSELF.

THE young man's words were unquestionably out of place, since he should not have lost his temper in the presence of a lady, howsoever pitifully infatuated she might have become.

Mrs. Carlingford was not to blame that she colored angrily.

"This is not the first time you have forgotten yourself this evening, Mr. MacWalters," she retorted. "It is perhaps well that Mr. Merrydew is not present to hear your words."

"His absence is certainly not my fault ma'm," continued MacWalters. "But I am already heartily ashamed of both my words and my manner, since they have unwittingly caused you pain."

"Oh, it's of no consequence—as coming from you."

For the first time Miss Carlingford spoke, rising at the same time with a flush.

"Mother, it is you that forget yourself," said she. "No, I shall no longer be silent! Nor shall I, for one, forget the deep, the valuable, the kindly services for which we are indebted to both these gentlemen. For my part—enough of this Merrydew business!" with an angrily contemptuous gesture—"I shall remember them with gratitude to my dying day."

Mrs. Carlingford was about to reply, perhaps in a more conciliatory tone, when MacWalters, who had grown very pale, but also very calm, interposed with a sorrowful movement.

"I understand, ma'm, and am becomingly humble," said he. "But when Mr. Merrydew so kindly informed you that I was a reformed criminal, an ex-thief—which is absolutely true—he might have also informed you, had he so chosen, who—I—really—am!"

His manner, no less than his words, was profoundly impressive.

"Heavens, sir! what do you mean?" ex-

claimed the mystified, and perhaps now a little conscience-stricken, Mrs. Carlingford. "Who are you, then?"

"One, madam, the mention of whose identity would not fail to redouble the blush in your cheek, perhaps revive the very strongest springs of emotion in your bosom!"

Mother and daughter were equally agitated now. They studied the speaker's lineaments—partly disguised for the occasion—with feverish intentness, while the younger murmured in a scarcely audible voice:

"The portrait up-stairs! Can it, might it be?"

Then Mrs. Carlingford clasped her hands almost supplicatingly.

"But that is no answer to my demand, sir!" she exclaimed. "Who and what are you, I say?"

MacWalters had his revenge.

"I decline to inform you," he answered, coldly; and with a manner that plainly implied: "You are not worthy of the confidence—at least not at present." And then, with another low bow, he joined Westcott, who was already standing at the door.

As if even this were not enough, he insisted upon a Parthian shaft at parting.

"However, madam, there is one piece of intelligence that I do not mind to impart, as I am quite sure it has not been already imparted by Mr. Merrydew—probably 'for reasons of his own.'"

Mrs. Carlingford bowed, and looked expectant.

"The child whose birth-mark interested you so deeply, madam, on the occasion of my last visit here, is not a boy, as was pretended, but truly a girl, and of exactly the same age that your granddaughter would now be."

Mrs. and Miss Carlingford sprung forward, with an agony of interrogation in their simultaneous cry.

"I have nothing further to say. Mr. Merrydew might afford you some information, you find him so exceedingly trustworthy."

And MacWalters coolly accompanied his friend out of the house.

They loitered a moment at the adjacent street-corner, discussing the situation.

"You were somewhat hard upon the elder lady," said Westcott, "but after what had gone before, I don't see how you can be blamed."

"She brought it solely upon herself, though I did feel sorry for Miss Carlingford," returned MacWalters. "How do you account for Merrydew having won them over so easily?"

"Not the younger lady."

"Mrs. Carlingford, then?"

"Serpent eloquence on his part, mental softness on hers."

"Still, the lady has not heretofore seemed soft, while Merrydew might have exerted the same serpent eloquence years ago."

"Perhaps he has not heretofore deemed it worth his while."

"Time enough, I think, to neutralize his influence, especially if we can get at Miss Carlingford alone, and obtain the promise of her co-operation."

"There is but one way to do that."

"How, then?"

"By promising in return to give up Eva—who is, in my opinion the lost grandchild without a doubt."

"I shall think that over. But don't you think I took the wind pretty effectually out of Merrydew's sails in that regard?"

"Undoubtedly."

"But there is one thing in this connection that puzzles me."

"What is that?"

"He is evidently intent on the scheme we heard him outline—to hand over both child and will together, for a moneyed consideration even in excess of his moiety in case the will were destroyed."

"Ah!"

"Well, even with the girl in his possession, to enable him to do that, his original intention would still have one drawback."

"What is that?"

"Eva's own purity, and the comparative civilization that I have already managed to instill in her character."

"I understand—it having been Merrydew's intention to return her to her own reeking from the slums, and all that?"

"That is it."

"For that reason, Niel, I can perceive a modification in his design."

"What is that?"

"He will return the child—if he can—along with the will, in all her recovered beauty and purity, but with something more than a money consideration in view."

"And that is?"

"The hand of Maud Carlingford in marriage."

"The scoundrel! you think so?"

"I'm sure of it. Do you forget the overheard words over which he and Holdover were nearly at each other's throats?"

"No; I remember them now. You must be right."

"I know I am. He's after, not the half, but the whole of the fortune, which might ultimately

come under his control with Miss Carlingford's hand."

"I see; though the widow and grandchild would still have their portions."

"Life is very uncertain, or would be in Merrydew's proximity. But one thing could seriously foil his purpose."

"And that?"

"The return to life and his own of William Carlingford, the missing son and brother."

"Whom you overheard Merrydew declare to be dead?"

"True; though I happen to have my own views on that point."

Here MacWalters abruptly pulled the speaker back into the shadow of the building.

The Carlingford street-door had opened with a slight sound, as though some one were coming out.

A muffled feminine figure, not so much muffled but that its pretty gracefulness was recognized, tripped noiselessly down the steps.

It was Miss Liscomb.

After a hesitating pause, as though to make sure she was not observed, she slipped across the avenue, and disappeared in the Park.

The detectives exchanged a glance, and at once started in noiseless pursuit by a roundabout course.

When they had succeeded in again coming upon the young woman unperceived, she was standing expectantly in a secluded walk between two little clumps of evergreens.

Scarcely had they effected their concealment in one of these before a large man was seen strolling leisurely down the path.

On joining the young woman, he proved to be Merrydew.

"You are here at last," he said. "I began to fear you would not be able to slip out unperceived."

Such of the girl's face as could be seen was very pale and determined, the forehead being veiled, doubtless to conceal remaining traces of her brutal treatment at Holdover's hands.

"I managed it, though with difficulty," she replied. "Now, Mr. Merrydew, what is it you wish to say to me about that traitorous scoundrel?"

"Time enough for bad news. Poor child! how trusting, and yet how wronged!"

He patted her head with a half-fatherly gesture, but was speedily repulsed.

"Don't think that I imagine you any better than he!" she exclaimed. "What is it you would convey to me?"

"Houghty-toighty! Well, his dearest secret, then."

"Let me have it."

"Don't be in a hurry."

"In a hurry? I'm on fire!"

"And I am—saving the natural effects of your prettiness on the blood, my dear—am cool as a cucumber."

"Did you bid me here for the purpose of torturing me?"

"No; but to satisfy my own curiosity, no less than yours."

She seemed to master her impatience with a great effort.

"I might have guessed it. Well, what do you want to know?"

"Of course, I have received something of a history of last night's affair, concerning you."

She glared at him.

"Don't speak of that!" she exclaimed. "I can't bear it—the thought of it is as a nightmare!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

RUFFLED HAWK AND TRAMPLED DOVE.

MERRYDEW laughed.

"Aren't you a little over sensitive on that score, Bella?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, doubtless. Look!"

She pushed back her veil, showing her contused and discolored forehead.

"I shouldn't have minded such a trifle, should I?"

"It was an infernal shame—a brute's work!" commented Merrydew, but in his unchanged, easy-going voice. "But you shall have your revenge, my dear—I swear it!"

Then he would have actually kissed the bruised forehead, but that he was repulsed afresh, this time with a dangerous glitter in the girl's eyes that he subsequently found occasion to respect.

"You must," said he, "have had some previous intimation of Holdover's abduction scheme, else you would not have been on the watch?"

"I had."

"Not from the ladies themselves?"

"No; from the detectives."

He seemed surprised.

"Through a miserable sleep-walking habit of mine." And she briefly related the incident.

"A bad habit that, Bella! Like sleep-talking, it is liable to lead to decidedly unpleasant self-betrays."

"Don't I know it?"

"Doubtless. But why did you spring upon Holdover at that critical moment?"

"She was in his arms! I was beside myself."

"Of course, you were. Why, you might have ruined all—the very scheme for unmasking the designs of your faithless lover, you know."

"I knew nothing but my own wrongs at the moment."

"Of course. Woman-like, woman-like—self, pure self, always and forever!" She broke into a harsh laugh.

"Even your part of the scheme didn't include the detectives' presence," she sneered.

"Hardly. It is an association, my dear, that I don't particularly crave. I candidly confess it. My natural frankness, you know."

"Of course; that is so well understood."

"Don't attempt sarcasm, my dear. It requires genius, masculine genius, for its proper application."

She made a furious movement.

"Have I yet earned the right to your promised disclosure?"

"Yes."

"Let me have it, then."

"First tell me if it is revenge or a lingering love that you still feel for Asdrubal Holdover?"

"Both."

"Ah! well, they often work well together."

"Man, man! Corrupt monster! tell me what you promised to disclose, or I will kill you!"

He burst into a hearty laugh, though as instantly controlled it.

"It will prove hard on you, Liscomb—that is why I have been delaying it."

"Of course; so much like you!"

"You doubtless imagine that Holdover would keep his faith and marry you forthwith, could he but get over his fascination—his infatuated desire for Maud Carlingford and her millions?"

"I know it."

"No, you don't; you only believe it. We are all more or less Agnostics of the here, no less than of the hereafter."

"I am sure of it, I tell you."

"You are frightfully mistaken, my dear."

"Explain."

"Holdover is already married, and has been for seven years."

She did not stagger, but stiffened into a breathless stillness, as if momentarily paralyzed.

When she did recover voice, it was in a hushed, changed hoarseness that startled even the heartless villain before her.

"False! false! false!" she murmured. "It must be false! The good God, who loves the wronged ones, and hates devils such as you are, Merrydew—He wouldn't let it be true!"

"Sustain yourself, Bella. The truth of what I say can be readily proved."

"Prove it to me, then."

"You shall do that for yourself, and at your chosen time."

"Speak, man, speak!"

Holdover's wife compelled him to bring her to the city from the country several years ago, after their two children had died."

"My God! were there children, too?" And she gave a sort of moaning wail.

"Of course. Mrs. Holdover now lives in a white cottage with red blinds at the corner of Eleventh avenue and 146th street, under an assumed name, though."

She looked up wildly.

"Ha! she might not be really married, then, but only another victim?"

"A truly Christian hope, my dear, but one that won't wash. Could you but see them together, you would have no doubt as to the reality of the conjugal relation" (she was grinding her teeth now), "for they quarrel like cats and dogs. Asdrubal is scarcely a model husband, it is true; but he occasionally visits the fair madam—and she is fair, by the way, only a trifle *passee*. I don't certainly know, but would be willing to bet my head that he is with her now, and will be likely to remain till more presentable elsewhere. You clapper-clawed him bravely, my little Liscomb."

A lost, hopeless air, indescribably distressing, had come over the wronged woman.

"God in Heaven!" she murmured, sinking on a convenient bench; "a few months ago this blow might have saved me; but now—too late! too late!"

The pallor of her face suddenly gave place to mantling, crimsoning shame, and then she buried it in her hands.

"Come, come!" said Merrydew, easily, but with a covertly unholy look down over the poor bowed figure, which somehow at this moment looked prettier and more pitifully girlish than was its wont. "You were going to bear up so bravely, remember."

"I didn't say so—even without expecting this, I didn't promise that," she murmured; and then she abruptly lifted her face, hopelessly pale once more, with a sort of wonder in it. "Oh, now I begin to see!" she exclaimed.

"What is it?"

"Why, Maud Carlingford would have been lost no less than I—even if he had succeeded in marrying her, it would have been bigamy."

"Of course."

"And she, even she, would have found herself bitterly shamed!"

"A fate which she has perhaps narrowly escaped—doubtless now to your infinite regret?"

"No, as God is my witness, no! My jealousy

of Miss Carlingford was but natural, but, before Heaven, I would have plucked her back from the abyss in which I—woe is me!—am engulfed forever! But, scoundrel and heartless villain that you are! it is likewise only natural that you should not understand the stirrings of a lost but noble spirit in a desolated breast."

He was about to make a characteristic reply, when a new impression seemed to seize her, and she sprang toward him like a tigress.

"You knew it—knew it all along!" she cried, seizing his massive arm and essaying to shake him with her feeble strength. "You were his friend and intimate, whatever you are to him now. You knew it—the fact of his having a wife already—even when he was fooling and deceiving me, no less than Maud Carlingford!"

"Of course I did, you little goosel! Don't be so insufferably, so comically intense, my dear." And he even patted the white-knuckled little grasp on his arm, while endeavoring to chuck her consolingly under the chin.

She recoiled from him with mingled horror and resentment, enforcing herself to a sort of desperate calmness.

"Oh, you devil!" she exclaimed.

"And you, my child, are an angel!"

"Oh, you devil!" she repeated, slowly and without heeding. "They talk of the Rook, so mysterious, so murderous and so powerful, but I do not believe that even the Rook is any more of a devil than you are. For that matter," with sudden maliciousness, "you might be the Rook himself—you are certainly capable of the double personation!"

A look of terror passed over the villain's sneering comeliness—but so quickly as to be gone before attracting the lynxed attention of the concealed detectives, who consequently still remained impervious to the truth—and then he in part recovered his mocking self-composure.

"Better and better!" said he. "Do kiss me, my dear!"

"But do not think," she went on, "that your treason to your friend, in the hope of obtaining Maud Carlingford's hand and fortune for yourself, shall avail you."

"Woman! what mean you? What do you know of that of which you speak?"

"Everything, deep and designing scoundrel that you are! I am not a household spy for nothing, Jacob Merrydew. We shall see if the ladies will mistrust my testimony, as they have done that of the detectives."

Merrydew's face was that of a fiend. The next instant she was in his furious and strangling clutch.

"We shall see nothing of the kind, I am thinking!" he hissed between his clinched teeth.

CHAPTER XXIX.

REPEATED ESCAPES.

MURDER was undoubtedly intended, but at the critical moment there chanced an unlooked-for interposition which relieved the ambushed detectives of a task—perhaps disconcerting—which would otherwise have devolved upon them.

"Help! murder!" bawled a familiar voice, and Silas Wiener came precipitately tumbling out of the opposite copse. "Here, Mr. Big Man, don't kill that gal! I've got a sort of *quasi* connection with the perlice, I have, and—"

Then it was he that was in Merrydew's enraged clutch, while Miss Liscomb seized the opportunity to slip away in the direction of the mansion.

But Wiener was found a vastly more difficult victim than the fragile woman even in Merrydew's tremendous grasp. Though possessed of comparatively little strength, and in spite of his temporary lameness from the bear-trap's jaws, Silas was of an eel-like slipperiness and hop-o'-my-thumb agility that were notorious throughout Paradise Corners and similar localities in which his not very enviable characteristics were known.

In the queer struggle that ensued, let the sledge-hammer blows fall as they might they invariably missed their intended mark, and the crushing bugs of the giant were equally unsuccessful in getting any sort of tangible or crushable substance within their grasp.

Breaking a butterfly, or pounding an apparition, was as nothing to the squirming impermanence encountered.

At last Silas slipped altogether out of his assailant's grasp, and took to his heels.

To the astonishment of the detectives, Merrydew attempted no pursuit, but, pulling himself together, strode rapidly off in an opposite direction, the shadows speedily swallowing his retreating figure.

Could they have still followed him, a new revelation, or an increased mystery, might have been their reward.

For Merrydew had disappeared up a heavily-wooded path leading to the heights, and did not reappear at all; though, in his place, there presently stepped forth in the moonlight, with infinite caution and address, a somewhat similar shape in build, size and muscular development, but more roughly coated, fur-capped instead of fashionably hatted, and with a countenance—swarthy, lowering and sinister—such as might

have risen out of one of the fire-crypts of the irredeemably lost.

A face and form, in fact, similar to those that had been flashingly revealed to the two detectives, just prior to the explosion of the coach-torpedo, and to MacWalters alone in the death-lock on the roof of the distillery.

The detectives had by this time come out of their ambush, and were on Silas's track, chatting and laughing in low confidential voices.

Was their discovery a species of prescience on the part of this newly-revealed monster, or had he received a timely intimation of their suspected presence from the man Merrydew, whose vanishment was the signal for the Unknown's evolution into visibility and action?

At all events, swiftly, relentlessly, stealthily, undiscoverably, he was on their track, stalking them as the jaguar stalks his prey, as the serpent slips upon its instinct-guided victim, as devils hunger for new Edens to contaminate and destroy.

"No good!" said MacWalters, slacking his pace. "Silas will not be likely to stop in his flight the side of one or another of his favorite run-holes in the neighborhood of Paradise Corners."

"I believe you," assented Westcott, also slacking up. "But how the deuce do you imagine could he have chanced in concealment so close to our own?"

"That is clear enough to me. Silas's desire for fresh 'stakes' is apt to make him a little too 'previous' at times. After running away from the woman's shot-gun, he doubtless divined that we would next betake ourselves to the scene of our last night's exploits, and preceded us to the Park. His chancing to get on Merrydew's track and to conceal himself in our proximity, was doubtless a mere coincidence."

"A lucky one for us, too. It would have given our hand away not a little for Merrydew to have suspected our secret observance of that interview."

"Do you know, at one time I was under the impression that he did suspect it?"

"No; are you in earnest?"

They had come to a pause in 146th street, a block or so west of the Carlingford corner.

"Certainly I am. It was at that point just before he lost his temper at her allusion to his connection with the Rook."

"How was it?"

"Well, nothing more than a swift glance in our direction, as though he might be conscious of our concealment there by a species of sensation."

"I didn't remark it. I was too much concerned with the unhappy young woman's anguish just then."

"Was it not horrible? Do you know, Westcott, there is no little nobility in that wronged young woman's character. Should she ever want a friend in need, she would not have to seek further than myself to find one."

"An unhappy case, Mac, an unhappy case! But let us be moving."

And so they moved on, leisurely enough, and unsuspecting of fresh danger, though—

"There was a step timed with their own,

A figure bent and bowed,
And a long white knife that glistened and shone.
Like a splinter of daylight downward thrown,
And the moon went behind a cloud."

It was the step of the deadly monster that had been stealthily tracking them from the Park—of the monster, too eager in his vengeful, sleuthing pursuit to be conscious that he was being tracked in turn.

At last, soon after the Fourth avenue crossing, when they had begun to descend the continuation of the street, which here became exceptionally forbidding and lonely, with several unfinished buildings on either hand, it was upon them—upon them, like Death himself, with a long loping quickening of gait, ending in a silent, panther-like spring.

An accidental misstep over the inequalities of the street alone saved MacWalters from the initial descent of the powerfully-driven blade.

As it was, the glancing stroke of the hilt upon his shoulder was alone sufficient to send him staggering to his knees; and then Westcott, startled into wariness by his companion's exclamation, had only just time to turn and evade a second stroke, intended for himself.

"The Rook! the Rook!" gasped MacWalters, throwing himself on the ground and rolling out of reach, while at the same time managing to draw his revolver, though with but a trembling hand, by reason of the shock received. "Tis he himself! My God! be quick with a bullet for him, Westcott. My arm is paralyzed!"

At the same instant he fired himself, but without effect.

But Westcott seemed, momentarily, no less paralyzed than he, and the revolver, which he had whipped out, was still wavering unsteadily in his grasp at the mention of that dread name, and the Rook was again upon him with up-lifted knife, exclaiming hoarsely:

"Yes, yes; the Rook reveals himself at last, and it is to the ruin of you both! Dogs of detectives! think ye to track down the Invisible, or to withstand the Ubiquitous?"

Westcott shuddered, but he again avoided the lunge, and then, his pistol missing fire, closed with his assailant, by dodging under the knife-hand, as his sole remaining chance.

But, strong and tough and seasoned as he might be, the veteran police detective was nothing more than a child in that gigantic grasp.

MacWalters, still dazed and half-stunned, staggered to his friend's assistance, but it was the wavering gait of a drunken man, and he dared not trust himself to fire again.

Almost in an instant Westcott was at his assailant's mercy—or rather mercilessness.

The giant's hand was on his windpipe with a strangling clutch, the giant's demoniac gaze glowering into his eyes with a pitiless glare, the giant's knife once more poised for its descent.

Then all was changed.

There came two cracks of a pistol in rapid succession.

At the first the uplifted knife dropped to the ground, while blood spurted from the wrist whose hand had wielded it.

At the second, the giant dropped his victim and reeled back, with a sort of bellowing roar, while clapping his unwounded hand to his side.

There was yet another crack from the mysterious pistol, the bullet seeming to take effect somewhere; and then, without a word, and in spite of his wounds, the monster wheeled in his tracks, and darted away with a rapidity that defied pursuit.

As the rescued detectives wonderingly pulled themselves together, Miss Liscomb quietly stepped out from behind some building material, with a small revolver still smoking in her hand.

"I saw him tracking you, so I tracked him," she explained. "I am glad to have been of service, but don't on any account mention me in the affair."

With that—for some policemen were now perceived running up the hill—she also turned in flight, and quickly disappeared.

"No need to talk the thing over!" muttered Westcott, throwing up his hands in a bewildered way. "I'm simply flabbergasted and done up!"

"I, too!" assented MacWalters. "Why the deuce we are alive is a matter of wonder to me."

They gave the arriving policemen such an account of the affair as suited their plans, and, a little later, boarded a Third Avenue Elevated train without further mishap.

CHAPTER XXX.

A FORTNIGHT LATER.

ANOTHER fortnight passed away without our detectives receiving any further information from the Carlingford ladies, and in which the will-and-murder mystery made no further sign.

But during this period neither Westcott nor MacWalters was idle.

The former, under his coadjutor's shrewd guidance succeeded in tracing the Rook—no longer quite so mysterious as formerly, though scarcely less redoubtable—to two of his whilom residences, or places of sojourn, in different parts of the suburbs, and thus establishing his actual existence in the general belief of police circles, which is saying a good deal, besides attending to several minor affairs in Paradise Corners having something of a bearing on the great quest in view.

MacWalters, on his part, put in his spare time in hunting down eight more members of the gang, including Crinkly Jake, Big Peters, Biter Magee, and five others of lesser local note, making sixteen in all on the long score, as he called it.

Moreover, he was intently engaged in his law-copying, besides making daily visits to Eva, who continued to dwell under the watchful care of Westcott and his wife, with as yet no other attempt having been made to abduct her.

The long silence of the Carlingfords seemed inexplicable to the detectives, who thought the subject of Eva alone would have served to increase their interest and inquisitiveness to an unusual extent.

But then they did not take into consideration Mrs. Carlingford's pride, which had been deeply offended, or were perhaps disposed to underestimate Merrydew's eloquence and plotting genius, both of which they might have guessed had been incessantly busy during their own absence from the scene.

But at last MacWalters, on stepping in at Headquarters, where he was now received with respectful recognition in the detective bureau, was handed a note, which proved to be from Miss Carlingford.

It was brief, with indications of having been penned in trembling haste or excitement, and simply begged MacWalters and Westcott to come to the house without delay; after which there was a postscript, saying: "And if Mr. MacWalters would kindly bring his little *protegee* along with him, both the writer and her mother would esteem it a special favor."

Niel smiled a little grimly as he passed the note to Westcott, who had just seated himself at his desk.

"Humph!" muttered the latter, running his

eye over the contents. "Shall you take the girl with you?"

Niel shook his head.

"Not this time."

"I don't know but you're right. It's downright cavalierly that they have treated us of late, while I don't doubt that that unmitigated villain, Merrydew, has been having the run of the house ever since our last momentous visit. However, let us go."

It was about the middle of a raw and unpleasant latter April day, with a cold rainy mist in the air, when they set out.

On the way thither MacWalters, who had been thinking the matter over, said:

"I think you will find there has been a rupture with Merrydew."

"With all my heart! But what makes you think so?"

"Something in the manner of Miss Carlingford's writing, that I can't altogether describe. Besides, they could hardly dream that I would think of bringing Eva, unless feeling sure of that scoundrel being out of the way."

"Well, we shall soon see."

MacWalters's impression proved correct, though there was yet more trouble in the air than he had anticipated.

The ladies were alone when the detectives were shown into the reception room.

"You didn't bring the little girl!" were Miss Carlingford's first words, while her mother's face expressed no less disappointment than her own. "However, perhaps we had no right to expect as much." With a sorrowful look.

MacWalters was touched, but he also had a very retentive memory.

"It was really out of the question," he answered.

"Ah! she ill?"

"On the contrary, my adopted daughter was never in better health than I can remember."

"And yet you could not bring her?"

"Not yet awhile, with due respect to you, ladies."

"Why not?"

"I feared her presence might not be pleasing to Mr. Merrydew; and, moreover, I do not forget that I am myself but a reformed criminal—an ex-thief."

Mrs. Carlingford looked inexpressibly mortified, while two large tears slowly forced themselves from the daughter's eyes as she murmured:

"It is but just. We have deserved it."

"Mr. MacWalters," said Mrs. Carlingford, struggling back to her composure, "I owe you an apology, which is herewith tendered. Will you accept it?"

"With the utmost pleasure!" exclaimed the young man. "Let no more be said or thought of this, I beg."

"Be seated, both of you," Mrs. Carlingford continued. "We are in great and new trouble, and consequently we seek your assistance out of it. That we have not done so sooner is owing, not alone to certain revelations that have come to us, but also to a sense of shame at our poor return for your heretofore invaluable services. We are but women, after all."

"Pray proceed, ma'am, as if nothing had occurred to interrupt our professional connection with you and yours," said Detective Westcott. "We are once again wholly and devotedly at your service."

"Thank you, sir—thank you, both! In the first place, then, let us beg of you never to mention Mr. Merrydew's name again, unavoidably, in our presence."

They bowed.

"Mr. MacWalters," the lady went on, "both my daughter and I feel assured that your *protegee* is none other than our long-missing darling, Elsie Ashner, the sole offspring of Maud's elder sister, Gertrude Ashner, who died of a broken heart incidental to the kidnapping of the child in its infancy. The identicalness of the birthmarks—in itself quite unique—the agreement in their ages—"

"Say no more!" interrupted MacWalters, impetuously. "I believe it already—have believed it longer than you suppose. I shall fetch your granddaughter to you without another instant of unnecessary delay." And he promptly arose to his feet.

Both mother and daughter were overjoyed at his words, but they insisted on his resuming his seat.

"Any other time to-day will do for the restoration of our lost darling to our hearts, now that we are sure of her," cried Miss Carlingford. "You must in the mean time listen, both of you, to all that my mother has to tell."

"The revelations to which I alluded," continued Mrs. Carlingford, "began to come upon us day before yesterday. Miss Liscomb, in spite of what was necessarily betrayed to me by her wild conduct with that wretch, Mr. Holdover, on the eventful night of your last professional services in this house, I had concluded to keep in my employ and continue to befriend, as though nothing unusual had occurred. But from that hour, but more noticeably from the night of your last embarrassing visit here, she began to act queerly, as if not in her right mind. It seemed to be the result, we thought, of some heavier and deeper distress than could

have arisen from the mere discovery of a lover's faithlessness. She is now down with a mild attack of brain-fever, from which our excellent family physician is uncertain whether she will recover with her faculties restored or not. We still find all this unaccountable, and yet gather from her occasional ravings that Merrydew, scarcely less than Holdover, is in some way responsible for her deplorable condition."

Here Westcott took advantage of a pause in Mrs. Carlingford's words to relate MacWalters's and his own experience in Mount Morris Square directly following their last visit to the house, and the adventures that had preceded and come after it.

This he did unhesitatingly and in the fullest detail, to such horrified edification of his listeners as can be best left to the reader's imagination.

It was some time after this before Mrs. Carlingford could go on with what she had to say but she at last managed to continue:

"Poor Bella's mystery being disposed of, it now becomes necessary for me to speak of Mr. Merrydew. I own with humiliation to having fallen temporarily under the strange spell of the man's specious eloquence and plausibility, though it is only just to my daughter to say that she refused to follow me in my infatuation, and steadfastly mistrusted him from the very first."

"However, his self-unmasking was not far off. Its first phase was made known to us yesterday, when Mr. Merrydew visited me for the express purpose of informing me that he was in love with my daughter, and wished to marry her."

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE POT KEPT BOILING.

MISS CARLINGFORD had burst into a short laugh, and Mrs. Carlingford had come to an impressive pause in her story, as though expecting her masculine hearers to express their astonishment at the announcement she had reached.

But as a matter of course, she was disappointed, so she went on:

"I shall spare you the details in such an absurd and yet delicate matter."

"Having received a becoming answer from both Maud and myself, Mr. Merrydew saw fit to utter certain threatening words, and went away from our presence in great anger."

"This morning he honored us with his next and last call, and with a proposition that fairly startled us, though it was one that we might have been led to anticipate, had we but paid attention to the predictions, facts and warnings vouchsafed us so earnestly by you two gentlemen."

"He offered to produce both the missing will and my missing grandchild, within a given time, on the condition of two-thirds of my husband's estate being made over to him."

"He became a little more generous upon seeing the blank looks of bewilderment and disgust that we made no effort to conceal."

"He proposed in addition to place us on the track of my lost son William, of whose death he had theretofore repeatedly assured us."

"As we had by this time come to feel that William's death was a *bona fide* fact, besides feeling assured that our lost little Elsie was identical with the girl Eva, we took less time even in rejecting this ridiculous proposition than the more personal one that had preceded it."

"Thereat Mr. Merrydew went into such a towering rage as to fairly appall us, though without shaking our determination to defy him to the last."

"You will not have conciliation and peace," he exclaimed, "then look out for trouble and war. The will shall be destroyed forthwith, and I shall consequently receive the moiety of the estate as my legal right. Your missing son and brother shall remain in obscurity. The missing child shall, in due time, be restored to you, but in what guise? As an embryo criminal and even worse than that—a swearing, smoking, drinking little tough, reeking from the lowest slums of New York—an object of shame and confusion to your family pride. Think not that you have already found traces of the child in the pretty little Eva whom the scoundrel, MacWalters protects for shrewd and selfish purposes of his own. It is not so. The real Elsie Ashner is under my eye, and has been for years. I can lay my hand upon her at any moment. She shall only be restored to you when she shall have completed her damning education in the school of vice and crime. I wish you joy of her and of your determination!"

"With that, he went away, leaving us indignant, anxious and astounded. Gentlemen, such is the complication of our troubles. We have consequently once more thrown ourselves upon your wisdom and generosity."

Mrs. Carlingford fell back in her chair, almost overpowered by the effect of her own words, and her daughter was scarcely less affected.

MacWalters, at a look from his companion, first took it upon himself to reply.

"While we find nothing new in what has been said, or at least nothing that we were not thoroughly prepared to hear," said he, "the

story we have just listened to is full of hope and encouragement."

Westcott nodded his assent, while the ladies looked up in blank astonishment.

"Merrydew is growing plainly desperate, and feels himself fairly at the end of his rope," MacWalters went on to explain.

"Why do you think so?" demanded Mrs. Carlingford.

"Because of his vain threats, and of certain facts or deductions that have come to Mr. Westcott and me of late. Merrydew knows as well as I that Eva is the true Elsie Ashner, and any other Elsie that he would undertake to foist upon you would be a creature for the occasion and of his own discovery."

"Moreover, he cannot destroy the missing will, for it was a fatal blunder on his part not to have destroyed it at the outset, and it is now no longer in his possession—of that we feel a confidence amounting little short of actual assurance."

Westcott nodded again.

"This is truly astonishing!" exclaimed Miss Carlingford. "In whose possession is the will, then?"

"To the best of our knowledge and belief, in the possession of Asdrubal Holdover."

"We are quite bewildered. Do explain, please."

"Westcott and I have been keeping quiet track of both Merrydew and Holdover during the past fortnight."

"The latter continues in retirement with his lawful and long-wronged wife in the rock-perched cottage with the red blinds, which has been described to you."

"Merrydew only visits his airy Wall street offices at irregular intervals, and then for what? To search for the stolen will, which slipped so (to him) mysteriously out of his hands."

"How did it disappear?"

"On the day of our notable adventure in those offices, the secret machinery of the Japanese cabinet caused it to slip in a receptacle between the flooring on which the cabinet rested and the ceiling of the next room below."

"Merrydew must have thought it sufficiently safe there, for it was not disturbed on the occasion of the hasty desertion of the offices subsequent to our tumble through the trap-doors. Holdover must have found some means to secretly abstract the will, whose absence is now causing Merrydew such dismay."

"At all events, it is now in Holdover's possession, as a spy in our occasional employ, a certain Silas Wiener, has discovered for us through a secretly-overheard conversation between Holdover and his wife, not quite a week ago."

"That he will keep it out of Merrydew's possession, his present deadly hatred of the latter is a sufficient assurance. In fact, you may receive negotiations from Holdover for the restoration of the will at almost any day or hour."

At this juncture, a slight movement in the adjoining hall-passage, accompanied by a sound as of the street-door being cautiously opened, caused both detectives to look up with a start.

"It can be nothing but one of the servants," said Mrs. Carlingford.

But MacWalters had already stepped to the window.

"It is Merrydew!" he exclaimed. "He has been eavesdropping to purpose, and there he goes up-street like an arrow let fly."

Here was a fresh sensation.

The ladies clasped their hands, while the detectives took their seats again with a "Well, we-must-be-going" air.

"That terrible man!" exclaimed Mrs. Carlingford. "Oh, what is to be done?"

"Don't be disturbed," said Westcott. "Merrydew is on his way to the white cottage with the red blinds, and we are about to follow him. In the disturbance there, it is odd if we do not learn something of the will's new hiding-place."

At this moment, a carriage was heard to drive up.

Simultaneously the door opened, and Miss Liscomb entered the room, fully attired for outdoors.

She had been believed to be in bed under a nurse's care, as has already been mentioned.

Mrs. and Miss Carlingford both started up in mingled amazement and alarm.

But, save that she was very pale and with a somewhat unnatural brightness in the eyes, Miss Liscomb appeared to be both rational and composed.

"Do not be alarmed, please," she said, pleadingly. "I am much stronger than I myself supposed, and, having some pressing business to attend to, I am going for a drive."

She stepped back, closing the door behind her; they heard her open the street-door, and then, as they ran to the window, they saw her hurriedly enter a coupe, to be rapidly driven away.

"Heavens! what can be the meaning of this?" cried Miss Carlingford. "That poor girl! And yet she seemed more settled in mind and manner than for days back."

A partial explanation was now afforded by the nurse, who came from up-stairs in great trepidation over what had happened.

"She was sleeping, and I had only been out of the room an hour," she exclaimed, "yet when I returned she had made her toilette, dressed herself in her best, and was gone!"

"You had only been out of the room an hour?" repeated Mrs. Carlingford, angrily. "What sort of a sick-nurse do you call yourself, anyway?"

"Oh, ma'm, do forgive me! The young lady was getting so much better, and seemed so sound asleep!"

"What message brought that carriage to the door so opportunely?"

"The housemaid confesses to have carried it for the young lady, ma'm, going out of the basement-way twenty minutes ago. The dear young lady gave her a dollar for having the carriage here at a stated moment."

The woman was dismissed.

The detectives had by this time made themselves ready for going.

"What do you purpose?" demanded Mrs. Carlingford. "Where are you going?"

"Just where both Merrydew and Miss Liscomb are bound for—the white cottage with the red blinds," returned MacWalters, reassuringly. "Be in good heart, ladies, both of you. We may possibly return with good news."

They hurried to their destination as fast as horse-cars and brisk pedestrianism combined could convey them, but were, nevertheless, too late to overtake either Merrydew or Miss Liscomb.

There was no one at the cottage but Mrs. Holdover, who was in a high state of troubled excitement.

But she had much gratuitous information to impart, on being informed of the official character of her visitors.

"Where is my husband, you ask?" she exclaimed. "Gone to fight a duel to the death with Mr. Merrydew, I reply. And then the wild and white young lady, who came here on the heels of their going? Well, gone also, either to stop the duel, or kill both men herself, I don't know which!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

A DUEL TO THE DEATH.

The detectives stared at each other and then at the woman.

"This is lunacy!" said Westcott. "Sane men don't fight duels here on Manhattan Island in broad daylight; and besides, it's a State Prison offense."

"Perhaps sane men don't, but crazy men do, I reckon," retorted Mrs. Holdover. "And if Asdrubal Holdover and Jake Merrydew weren't crazy-mad with each other, when they danced out of this house together, twenty minutes ago, with covered swords in their hands, then I don't know what I'm talking about. Both know how to use the weapons, too, for both were officers during the Civil War."

"Where would they be likely to fight?" demanded Westcott.

"In one of those rocky quarry-valleys down that-a-way," and she pointed off in the direction of the river. "I say, Mr. Officers, can you tell me anything about the pale young lady that asked and received the same directions from me just a little before you put in an appearance? I'm sort of curious and suspicious."

MacWalters made a sign to his companion. "You seem strangely indifferent, ma'm," said he, "in view of your husband having just gone out to fight a duel to the death."

"It won't be to his death, at least, not at the hands of Jake Merrydew," was her reply. "Asdrubal was the crack fencer of his regiment, and—always barring the penalty, of course—nothing would please me better than to learn of his pinking that black-hearted hound in the ribs. But you haven't answered my question about the young lady."

"No, not yet."

"What! you do know her, then?"

"Yes."

The woman's worn face darkened.

"And it is some folly of Asdrubal's that fetches her here?"

"Yes."

"Tell me all you know—quick!"

"Not unconditionally."

"Why not? What do you mean?"

"Your husband has in his possession an important document, formerly in Merrydew's possession."

"Of course he has. That is one of the things they are going to cut each other's throats about."

"Mrs. Holdover, the document I refer to is the stolen Carlingford will, whose recovery Mr. Westcott and I are seeking in the interest of the family to whom it rightfully belongs."

"Well?"

"Do you know where the document is concealed at present?"

"Mr. Officer, I've been an abused, a long-suffering and somewhat wicked woman, but I never yet stooped to a lie. I do not know where the will is hidden."

"We demand that you give it into our custody."

She laughed unpleasantly.

"Oh, you do? Well, keep on demanding."

"Do you doubt our authority for making the demand? And the official badges?"

The woman put her arms akimbo.

"I doubt nothing, and I give up nothing. So, there."

"We might search the house."

"Search, and welcome! You might search till doomsday, and find nothing without a tip, which you'll never get from me."

"Very well. Then your curiosity shall remain unsatisfied with regard to the pale, pretty little lady."

"Pretty, indeed?" with rising temper. "But men are all fools!"

"Pity she can't be told, too," in a distinctly audible undertone. "It was that same little woman that so clawed Holdover's face with her finger nails a couple of weeks ago, was it not?"

"What are you saying?" cried the woman, with angry eagerness.

"Nothing for your ears, with no disrespect, ma'm," replied Westcott.

"But I insist on knowing! It is my right. Holdover is my husband—though it ain't much to brag about."

"No document, no information," interposed MacWalters.

But the woman was of no ordinary sort.

There was a moment's struggle, an agony of hesitation, and obligation was triumphant over curiosity.

"All right, gentlemen," said she, calmly. "Oblige me by going about your business."

But as they were hurrying away over the rocks in the direction of the vaguely-indicated dueling-ground, and making the best of their disappointment as to the missing will, they glanced back to perceive that Holdover's wife had thrown on her bonnet and cloak, and was silently following them.

"A good sort of woman, that!" suggested Westcott.

"Yes," asserted the other; "entirely too good for a cur like Holdover, who isn't worth a millionth part of the forgiveness and devotion she wastes on him."

It did seem strange and unreal that such a thing as a regular duel to the death should be going on in broad daylight there among the unfinished streets of populous suburban New York in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

But such was the fact, and the detectives, by fortunate accident, came without difficulty upon the very spot where it was in progress.

It was a sort of a shallow quarry-pit in an unsettled and secluded locality, overlooking the lordly Hudson, with its skirting railroad tracks, and surrounded on every side by large broken masses of rock, interspersed with bushes and stunted trees.

Here in the center of this depression, the rocky floor of which was comparatively level and smooth, the two duelists were engaged in a furious, deadly and artistic combat with regulation army swords.

Indeed, so intent were they in their deadly business as to take no note of the approach of the detectives, who had come to a pause between a couple of rocks at the verge of the battling-ground, where they remained as if fascinated.

Both combatants had discarded their coats, waistcoats and shirt-collars, and their shirt-sleeves and under-sleeves were rolled up so high as to display their hairy and muscular arms to the full; those of Merrydew's being prodigies of muscular development, while Holdover's, though smaller, were none the less the arms of a trained athlete, and he somewhat surpassed his bulkier and taller antagonist in agility, but not much so.

There was no sign of Miss Liscomb having reached the scene, the inference being that she had lost her bearings in the search for it.

Both combatants were perfect masters of *l'Art de l'Escrime*, and, though it was evident that they had been for some minutes hotly engaged, neither had as yet drawn blood.

Just as the witnesses settled down in their post of observation, however, the pair burst apart, and mutually recoiled, to recover breath.

Westcott, with the policeman's instinct, was about to call out a cessation of further hostilities, when MacWalters laid a hand beseechingly on his arm.

"Not yet," he whispered. "No one can prove the time of our first arrival here, so why not see it out. If I mistake not, Merrydew is the inferior fencer."

Westcott half-assented, and the prediction was speedily borne out by the result.

As the combatants came together again, after exchanging menacing glares and frowns, it became evident that Merrydew, notwithstanding the undiminished vigor of his tall, powerful frame, was the more blown of the pair.

A slight limp also was now perceptible for the first time in one of his legs, and he occasionally pressed his left hand to his side, perhaps indicative of recently healed injuries.

He was, however, no less eager, determined and bloodthirsty than his opponent, and the renewed struggle that was begun speedily became closer, hotter, and more deadly than its predecessor.

Westcott was again on the point of announcing his presence when Merrydew was suddenly disarmed by a cleverly-executed feint.

The sword flew several yards out of his grasp. In leaping back, with a bitter curse, he slightly tripped, falling upon one knee in his attempt at recovery, and at the same instant the sword's point of his exultant and remorseless antagonist was rushing, point-blank, at his defenseless breast.

But it was not decreed by Fate that it should find lodgment there.

At the critical instant a shot rung out from the opposite side of the quarry, and Holdover suddenly recoiled, his own sword dropping from his nervous grasp.

Then he was down on his back, the upper part of his body convulsed, the lower portion motionless, as if paralyzed; while the astounded Merrydew, who had doubtless wholly given himself up as lost, was once more upon his feet with such bewildered gratification in his face and eyes as might be looked for in a fortunate fiend's unexpectedly delivered from the fiery gulf's consuming grip.

Both Westcott and MacWalters had instinctively turned, thinking the shot due to Holdover's wife, who had silently stationed herself a few yards behind them.

But she was now seen running down toward the fallen man, while uttering scream upon scream; and with reason, too, for the treacherous Merrydew had lost no time in recovering his sword, and was in the very act of plunging it into the prostrate and still writhing body, as if fiendishly intent upon completing the bloody advantage that destiny or chance had wrought in his behalf.

He reluctantly desisted, however, on the detectives suddenly rushing down upon the scene, with a great and warning shout.

It was evident that Holdover had received an agonizing and mortal hurt.

He raised his head out of his wife's pillowing lap, and pointed glaringly at Merrydew, who was rapidly resuming his discarded garments.

"Arrest that man!" he hoarsely ejaculated; "he is guilty of numberless crimes. I'm done for—I feel it—but I shall live long enough to denounce him—to hang him with my testimony, if I have to drag myself half-out of the grave to do it! Oh, the agony, the agony, the agony!" And he writhed afresh.

Merrydew burst into a brutal laugh, and having completed his toilette, assumed a half-mocking, half-defiant attitude.

"Who fired my death-shot?" gasped the wounded man, rallying again. "I shouldn't have cared—I might even have welcomed it, had I but had his heart's blood first, as was my conqueror's due—but where is the person who fired it? I want to know."

Westcott was busy with ascertaining the nature of the injury, but MacWalters pointed with his hand, saying solemnly:

"Look! she comes. The deliverer of your death-shot is here!"

Holdover rolled his head and turned his eyes, and as he did so he gave a hollow groan.

It was Miss Liscomb, slowly advancing from her place of concealment, the fatal revolver in her hand.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

AFTER THE DUEL.

HOLDOVER'S wife had also uttered an exclamation, a fierce one, and she would have doubtless sprung upon her husband's murderer but for something indescribably forlorn and pitifully desperate in the latter's aspect restrained her, if it did not in some measure palliate the deed.

"I die by her hand, and it is just!" groaned the sufferer, fixing his wild eyes remorselessly upon Bella's set and somewhat vacant face. "Mark her well, wife, and do for her what she can never do for me—forgive her! It is Bella Liscomb, and she has been more foully wronged by me than you have ever been. It is the woman whose love I betrayed, whose bosom I desolated, whose white soul I would have blackened with desertion, contumely and despair. God of Justice! the remorse, the anguish of this hour!"

Merrydew, who had imperceptibly edged his way to the foot of the descending rocks, here broke into another and a contemptuous laugh.

The sound of it seemed to thrill the forlorn young woman like an electric shock.

Life and hatred leaped into her colorless, dazed face.

In an instant, and before she could be prevented, she had sprung toward the scoundrel, raised her weapon, and fired.

Merrydew's cheek was slightly furrowed by the leaden messenger, causing the blood to trickle down his face; and, with a last mocking laugh, he sprung lightly to the rocky slope.

"Arrest him!" buskily cried the wounded man again. "Don't let him slip! I'll be evidence against him. You don't conceive who and what he is!"

MacWalters was about to obey, when, just as Merrydew's huge form was vanishing over the rim of the quarry-cup, so to speak, Silas Wiener's familiar face and figure came into view among the rocks, and, with an intelligent sign, he slipped into the fugitive's wake.

"That will do for the present," said Niel.

"I can't imagine how Silas chances to be on

hand, but it is fortunate for us, and the scoundrel will doubtless be tracked to his latest lair."

But now ensued the saddest feature of this tragic scene.

Miss Liscomb, with the vacant look returned to her face, had turned, cast aside her weapon, and was slowly advancing toward her prostrate lover with a wide-eyed, pallid, forlorn impressiveness of aspect that arrested the attention of all—even of the men and boys, including several policemen, who were hurrying to the spot, attracted thither by the shots and the woman's screams.

Suddenly she paused, a look, half of wonder, half of dread, coming into her countenance.

"Asdrubal, my faithless lover, dead!" she cried. "Aha! then I, too, am dead. Yes, he and I and all of us are dead and in hell—the hell that is kept ready and hot for false, perjured men and trusting, deluded, shame-stricken women alike! Yes, yes; and it is not hot at all, and all of us are happy!"

Then she began to sing and dance, after which fit upon fit of crazy, screaming laughter burst from her mirthless lips, and it became painfully evident that her tottering reason had at last fallen, perhaps to rise no more.

Holdover forgot his physical torture for the moment, and covered his eyes with a remorseful groan; even his wife turning away her head with a commiserating shudder.

"Take the unfortunate creature in charge," said Westcott to a couple of the policemen, who silently obeyed. "Mrs. and Miss Carlingford, of No. — Madison avenue, are her friends, with whom you can communicate. Now, you two others, lend a hand to help my companion and me convey this wounded man to his home, which is fortunately not far distant. All shall be explained to you presently. Gently, now; we cannot be too careful, for I have made a superficial examination and fear the spinal cord is shattered."

An hour later, the sufferer was much easier, though an attending physician had gravely announced that death would ensue within a week, and both Westcott and MacWalters were still with him.

Disappointment and gloom were unequivocally expressed in their faces, for in spite of their urgent entreaties, Holdover persisted in refusing to immediately place the stolen will in their custody.

A strange change of mind had also come over him, and he seemed to really believe that he was going to recover his health and strength.

"I tell you I won't give it up, and that's the end of it!" he finally exclaimed. "I'm going to get over this thing. When I do, I'll give you all the testimony against Merrydew you require, if you once get him in your clutches, which is more than doubtful. You'd think so too, if you could only suspect who and what he really is, and I'm not ready to tell you that much yet. Candidly speaking, I'm afraid to in my present helpless condition. But there's money in that will—money for a poor man like me, and I'm going to make all there is before giving it up. Yes, yes; when the Carlingfords are ready to talk money-talk they'll find me willing to meet 'em half-way. Lottie, show the gentlemen out. They're pretty decent fellows, but I have a natural antipathy for their profession."

No more was urged, and the detectives gloomily took their departure.

It was now nearly dark, and they had not taken many steps down the avenue when they found Silas Wiener on the watch for their coming.

"I knowed you must be in the cottage back yonder," said he, with his ceremonious grin. "Is the watch-dog in a more amiable mood? And I do sincerely hope you found the shot-gun and the bear-trap in order."

They had been too much beholden to Silas of late, and were expecting too much more at his hands, not to accept his nonsense with a certain degree of equanimity.

"That is all right, Silas," returned MacWalters, good-humoredly. "Now tell us how you happened to be at the dueling-ground so opportunely."

"Easily enough explained, my dear sir. I have been uncommonly thirsty for a week or more, in consequence of a lamentable deficit in my exchequer—haven't averaged twenty drinks *per diem*, on the honor of a nobleman in distress! So I have been tracking you two up, or keeping you in sight, for the greater part of the day. Simple enough, eh?"

"Good! Now let's see if you've earned your stake to-day."

"I honestly think I have."

"Let us see. Did you track down Merrydew, without his suspecting it?"

"Better than that."

"How?"

"I found his up-town retreat—and such a retreat. I have even explored it secretly in his absence, for he did not tarry longer than to change his shirt and stanch the bullet-scratch in his cheek."

"You are in earnest?" they both exclaimed, deeming this almost too good to be true.

"Never more so—on the honor of a prince of

the realm! Come with me, and you shall investigate for yourselves. He will suspect nothing. You can there pounce upon him unawares at almost any time."

They followed him promptly, not demurring to give him several drinks on the way, as an initial reward for his fidelity.

They were led due northwesterly, and across lots when practicable, until they reached a most isolated and lonely burned-out stone villa, in one of the most picturesque localities of the Washington Heights suburb.

It was on a cheerless, little-frequented cross-road. The ample grounds, once expensively decorated and tastefully laid out, were in the saddest neglect and decay.

Of the villa itself, all of the bare and blackened walls that remained entire was a stone staircase-tower.

"Come!" said Silas, leading the way to a doorless opening at the bottom of the tower. "This is the way—*sic itur ad astra*!—and I am confident that the coast is still clear."

The inclosed winding stair, being also of stone, was found to be comparatively entire.

Mounting to the top, they came to a landing with a rickety iron door opening from it; and, passing through the entrance, they were in a large circular rudely-furnished room, as if with chance articles picked up, piece by piece, at cheap auction sales, and yet with a rough air of comfort about the place.

"Here we are, gentlemen!" said Wiener, rubbing his hands. "Behold the ascetic and eccentric rustic retreat of our elegant man about town, when wearied of the hollow ostentation and glittering superficialities of Fashion's giddy whirl!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE TOWER RETREAT—AN UNLOOKED-FOR SET-BACK.

WIENER'S characterization of the round tower room was not an inappropriate one.

A shrewd villain, such as Merrydew, desirous of secrecy in his movements and habits, might have fitted up the place by degrees, and sojourned there in unquestioned seclusion for months, if not for years.

"Rather a change from the boudoir office connection in Wall street!" commented MacWalters.

"I should say so," assented Westcott. "But what might there be in this affair?"

He laid his hand on a monster hair trunk, whose lid, being unprovided with a lock, he unceremoniously opened.

"Oho! a strolling player's miscellany, or a burglars outfit, which?"

There were wigs, false beards, complexion-changers, and the like, innumerable, not to mention many ordinary articles of wardrobe, and not a few richly ornamented and rare weapons.

"Strange!" muttered MacWalters, curiously examining an Afghan pistol and a Japanese hari-kari short-sword from among the collection. "Almost a suggestive coincidence, in fact!"

"What is it?" inquired Westcott. "What do they suggest?"

"My topaz and amethyst headed Malay creeses, which might well have come from this same collection."

"Oho!"

"Yes; one of them a souvenir of Holdover's first murderous attack on me (and I've the star-crescent scarf-pin, too, by the way), and the other of my roof-fight with the Rook himself."

"The deuce!"

"Yes; depend upon it, both Merrydew and Holdover must have even a closer connection with His Invisible Redoubtability than we have yet conceived."

"I believe you."

"And, anent the Holdover souvenirs, we did not, by the way, bring them and their testimony home to him there at his bedside as we might."

"Time enough at our next interview. Let us be going now. It behooves us to keep our knowledge of this retreat of Merrydew's a secret till we're fully prepared to avail ourselves of it."

"Good."

The articles were carefully replaced, the trunk closed, and they hurriedly deserted the tower.

When well on their way back to their starting-point, Westcott and MacWalters held a private consultation.

After that, each of them placed a silver dollar in Wiener's itching palm, and Westcott said:

"We're not through with you yet, my man. Follow instructions to the letter, and this amount is but a tithe to what you shall receive for your services."

Silas's eyes sparkled, and his mouth began to water.

"What is required of me, most valiant lords and gentlemen?" he exclaimed, with his hand on his heart, and his gaze upon a twinkling light that might be a gin-mill's beacon through the dusk. "Only name the service?"

"MacWalters says you have the unusual faculty of remaining watchfully awake at will, even when 'full' to the lips?"

"In the open air—yes, my liege," corrected the other. "It is but one of my numerous and varied accomplishments."

"All right! You shall remain on outside watch all night over the Holdover cottage, and, in case of danger to its wounded inmate, telegraph the fact to us, at Headquarters, from the nearest station without an instant's delay."

"Consider it done. I go but to fill an innocent and friendly flask, as a preliminary for this important and honorable service."

And, with a parting bow, the spy disappeared like a shot.

"Do you think he will prove faithful?" asked Westcott.

"Undoubtedly," was MacWalters's reply. "Now for our own next parts!"

"What do you suggest?"

"Your return alone to the Carlingfords, to give the ladies the news, and arrange for talking money-talk to Holdover on the morrow. Word shall be left at Headquarters of an anticipated notification from Silas."

"Excellent! And you?"

"I shall not be long in rejoining you. My errand is to restore Elsie Ashner to the arms of her grandmother and aunt."

They forthwith separated.

But, half an hour later, as MacWalters was entering the hallway of the flats-house in which the Westcotts made their home, there were signs of an unusual disturbance going on above.

Women were crying out, men's voices, in excited tones exclaiming, and there was a hurried trampling of feet in the ordinarily quiet and orderly house.

Rushing up-stairs, he found the commotion at and in the vicinity of the Westcott apartments, and guessed the miserable truth at once.

The crowd made way, and then Mrs. Westcott came running out to him, with a bloody bandage newly tied round her forehead.

"Oh, Mr. MacWalters!" she cried, wringing her hands. "The child, the child! The sweet little Eva!"

"Ha! She has been kidnapped!" he exclaimed, in a husky voice. "Be quick! By whom, and how long since?"

The details were speedily in his possession.

Scarcely twenty minutes previous to his arrival, a big man, roughly coated and in a fur cap, had rushed into the Westcott rooms, where the detective's wife was busy preparing the evening meal, with Eva assisting her, and made an attempt to seize the girl.

Mrs. Westcott, according to her own account, had made a desperate interposition until the ruffian had suddenly disclosed a full view of his face.

That was enough. She described it as the face of a swarthy, beetle-browed fiend, whose mere glance froze the blood in her veins. A heavy blow had felled her, and when she recovered her senses ruffian and child had disappeared.

MacWalters waited but to pick up these unimportant facts—unimportant in view of what he had intuitively divined—and then hurried away.

When he made his next appearance before the Carlingford ladies and Westcott his face told the tale before he could open his lips.

"Gone!" was all he could say at first, as he sunk into a proffered seat. "Kidnapped in earnest this time! The Rook again!"

The disappointment and anguish of both mother and daughter can be imagined, while Westcott was silently resentful over the treatment his wife had undergone, no less than over the misfortune to the child.

"Come!" said he, rising at last, after all had been told. "Come, Niel; we must be going."

MacWalters also arose.

"Where shall you go?" demanded Mrs. Carlingford, who had somewhat recovered her composure.

"Where else than to recover the kidnapped child, ma'am?" replied the detective, simply.

"But the Rook himself has the child, you say?"

"True."

"And where shall you look for the Rook?"

"At Merrydew's tower-retreat, that I have told you of."

"But is the Rook himself likely to be there?"

"Perhaps not. But Merrydew shall disclose his secret lurking-hole at the revolver's point, if we can but come upon him, as I do not think it unlikely we shall."

"Oh, if you only may!"

"He will be likely to hug his tower pretty closely after this dueling affair, depend upon it."

"Yes, that is true," said MacWalters. "Be of good heart, ladies! It is no longer my little foster-child Eva, but your lost darling Elsie, that we hope to restore to your bosoms."

The ladies promised to keep their house open all night in anticipation of their return, and the detectives hastened away.

"The Rook has undoubtedly stolen the girl in Merrydew's interest," said Westcott, on their way to their destination.

"Not a doubt of it."

"But that is what I can't exactly understand."

"What can't you understand?"

"Merrydew's object in securing the child now, when he must know that his cake is dough, so

far as his game with the Carlingfords is concerned."

"But he doesn't quite know that."

"Doesn't he know that his last threat, to restore to them a little imp of the slums as the lost Elsie cannot possibly be carried out?"

"Not if he is the designing, unscrupulous devil we have found him to be."

"But what can he want with Eva, the real Elsie?"

"To make her what he threatened—a swearing, thieving little creature of the slums—before restoring her to her own."

Westcott stared.

"Good God!" he exclaimed. "Well, I suppose the man is capable of it."

"Ay, and not such a difficult task, if time is accorded him."

"You surprise me, MacWalters. My wife and I have found the child a little angel—obedient, sweet, loving, respectful, truthful—with a beautiful disposition."

"And with a childish nature as wax for the reception of every fresh impression, be it for good or bad."

"You must be right. I had forgotten that."

"Why, I had hardly succeeded in eradicating the hoydenishness that she had already caught from my old evil associates when I took her to your protection, Westcott. True, under my watchful and earnest care, she had improved with marvelous rapidity, shuffling off the fresh-forming vicious inclinations as if by magic. She seemed to discard them with no more effort than she did her cigarettes, almost at my mere bidding."

"True, true; a wonderful little girl!"

"The child's nature is as wax, I say. And don't you see that the same plasticity for good would be equally impressionable to a revival of vicious and evil propensities, in an unscrupulous villain's hands?"

"Yes, yes; but let us not give its bare possibility a thought. It is too dreadful! We must recover the child at once—this very night!"

"It shall be done," muttered MacWalters, in his deep, earnest way, "or I, for one, shall die in the attempt."

They had by this time quitted the 125th street horse-car in which they had been traveling, and were hurrying up the Eleventh avenue hill on foot, with the intention of passing Silas's post of observation on their way to the tower-retreat.

Presently a bright light flashed into the sky some blocks, or street-squares ahead of them.

"By Jupiter!" exclaimed MacWalters at last; "it is the Holdover cottage in flames!"

A moment later there was left no room for doubt, and, breathless with excitement, they quickened their pace into a run.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE TRUTH AT LAST.

THEY met Silas Wiener approaching them, bruised and bleeding, from near the foot of the rock on which the blazing cottage was perched.

"How did it happen? Speak!" cried MacWalters, fiercely.

"The Lord only knows!" groaned Silas. "The incendiary first chucked me over the crag, and when I crawled out from the bottom the house was on fire."

"Who was the incendiary?"

"The devil."

"Don't trifle, man!"

"I say it was the devil—the same gigantic, black-muzzled, bristly devil out of whose grip I wriggled in Mount Morris Square!"

"The Rook! the Rook!" shouted MacWalters, springing up the steep, whither Westcott had preceded him.

One entire side of the cottage, including nearly the entire upper story, was already in flames.

The great watchdog lay dead at his kennel-door, looking as if its neck had been suddenly dislocated by two immensely powerful hands seizing it by the back and the scalp simultaneously, and then putting on the requisite twisting force.

"We must get out Holdover alive at any cost!" cried Westcott, rushing to the cottage door. "Remember, it is our last chance for the missing will!"

MacWalters was at his heels, but at that instant there was a woman's shriek, combined with a hoarse sort of inhuman roar, from within—the first intimation thence.

Then the door flew open, and the Rook himself—towering, burly, torrent, swart-visaged and deadly in the fierce glare of the flames, and with his outstretched bare hands hooked convulsively, as if fresh from some strangling; piecemeal-tearing clutch—came plunging out of the burning house, with the Holdover woman, knife in hand, no less than dauntless and resentful, on his track.

The detectives were so taken by surprise as to be incapable of drawing their revolvers before they were thrust, reeling, to either side, after which the monster disappeared at a tremendous run over among the rocks, with a demoniac laugh that was piece and parcel of the inhuman roar that had preceded it.

"Let him go then, the fiend!" cried the wo-

man. "He didn't quite succeed in tearing my poor husband to pieces, much as he wished to. But be quick! or Asdrubal will be burned to death. He is in a horrible condition!"

She dashed back into the house, followed by the detective.

The occupied sleeping-room had fortunately been on the first floor.

It was already half-full of smoke, besides being hot as an oven, and Holdover was truly in a pitiable state.

In addition to his original injury, he had been brutally pounded over the face and head, while his breast and neck were frightfully torn, as if by the claws of a ferocious beast.

If ever retribution had come swooping down upon wrong-doing, it had done so in the case of the wrecked scoundrel, Asdrubal Holdover.

He rolled his head from side to side, and seemed hardly conscious, as they carried him, bedding and all, out of the burning cottage.

There was no hope whatever of saving anything else.

"The will? the will?" exclaimed MacWalters, in an agony of suspense; "the stolen will?"

"Don't be alarmed," said the woman. "The will is safe, dearly as that fiend wanted it. I fought him off to the last, though God knows how it would have ended had you not come in season!"

She looked up from supporting her husband's head, and showed her arms, which were seen to be black, blue and lacerated from wrist to shoulder through the torn ribbons of her sleeves.

"You are a brave, true woman!" said MacWalters; and Westcott nodded his acquiescence.

By this time the usual crowd of sight-seers, interspersed with a few policemen, had gathered about the burning cottage.

Holdover was in too desperate a condition to be removed to other shelter, the nearest neighbor being many rods distant, with the rocky and broken ground between.

In fact, the man was dying when he had been rescued from the flames.

The death-bed scene was under a shelving rock, but a short distance from the burning house, and with only a thin line of policemen to keep back the pressure of the morbidly curious crowd.

MacWalters was at one side of the bed, Westcott at the other, and the stricken wife, after propping the uneasy man high upon its pillows, held his hands clasped in hers, mute and pallid now in her voiceless, all-forgiving woe.

Suddenly the dying man rallied, and he seemed to take in the full significance of his surroundings.

"I'm not worth your forgiveness, Charlotte!" he managed to say, in broken, husky tones.

"Hush, hush! yes you are, my love! my poor Asdrubal!" and the tears silently rolled down her worn cheeks as she pressed the hands in hers.

"Good God! what a thing is woman's love, that we so deceive, wrong, trample and despise until it is too late—too late!"

The words burst from his lips in a sort of passionate wail.

"Hush, hush! all is forgiven—I forgive you, anyway."

"Kiss me, Charlotte! then I'll know that you do."

She did so, though instantly starting back with a moan at the change swiftly taking place in his face.

"Quick!" he hoarsely whispered; "the stolen will. Give it me in my hand!"

She tore open a slit in the side of the mattress on which he was lying, thrust her hand into it to the elbow, and, producing the precious document, did as he demanded.

Holdover signed both detectives to bend nearer, but, as they did so, it was into MacWalters's keeping that he thrust the will.

"I don't want to discriminate," he whispered—"you are equally brave and deserving—but let him, MacWalters, take it to the rightful owners."

"All right!" said Westcott, cheerily, as MacWalters was securing the document on his person. "It's all the same, my poor fellow."

"I'm going, boys! It's the end. Lottie, your hand. Good God! what is to become of you? Nothing left—hardly a dollar—no insurance—nothing but debts."

"Make your mind easy," said Westcott, reassuringly. "In return for the restoration of that document, I can answer for it that neither Mrs. Carlingford nor her daughter will see your faithful wife want for anything."

"I can answer for it, too," added MacWalters, in a strangely confident voice.

The dying man seemed greatly consoled, and drew a long, slow breath.

"Grant us one parting favor," said Westcott, urgently. "You have yet time to tell us, I think."

"What is it? Tell you what?"

"The real relation existing between Merrydew and the Rook, and our best method for capturing both."

The dying man stared, and then a look of mingled hatred and wonder came into his face.

"Good heavens!" he managed to ejaculate; "is it possible that you have never yet suspected

—that you have remained hoodwinked even longer than I was to the truth?"

"Suspected what? what truth?"

"That the Rook and Merrydew are one and the same!"

Then, as the astounded detectives started back, full of self-accusing mortification now, that the truth had never occurred to them before, there was a final, gasping effort from the moribund.

"Kiss me again, Lottie!" he gasped. "Quick, quick! only your kiss, your love, can keep back that fiend, the Rook, from snatching for my soul. Kiss me, I say! There—now—"

He was gone, with only the wronged, but still loving, still faithful woman weeping silently above the pulseless breast.

The fact of Merrydew and the terrible Rook being identical must have been divined by the reader so long before this announcement as to cause no little wonder that such shrewd men as our two detectives should have not suspected it say almost from the outset.

But it must be remembered that they were the constant actors amid the various complications of the tragic quest, and wholly without the advantage of that sectional bird's-eye view of the situations, with the accompanying opportunities for inference and deduction, that has been presented by the writer's art.

How easy for the historical student, for instance, with the errors no less than the accuracies of the actors bared to his judgment, to decide how easily this or that battle or political measure might have been won, or how insanely it was lost, when the result criticised might have been so different had the actors therein but *perceived* the enlightenment that is now at his disposal.

Shortly after Holdover had breathed his last, Westcott and MacWalters, accompanied by three stalwart special police officers from the nearest Precinct Station were on their way to the tower-retreat of Merrydew-Rook, as he might be termed.

All were armed to the teeth, the detectives being determined that, this time at least, no precautions should be spared in making sure of their redoubtable game.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE TOWER-RETREAT—DAYLIGHT AHEAD.

ARRIVING at the foot of the lonely tower, it seemed absolutely abandoned.

Not a ray of light glimmered from either of the windows in the round room at the top, the narrow, railless iron balcony running around under them showing its frail tracery against the moon, now full and bright, like little more than a spider's web girdling the tall summit.

"I know this place," said one of the policemen. "It is the old Guntry estate, and was wholly neglected and in litigation long before it was burnt out, about five years ago. Since then it has been shunned and neglected more than ever."

"A cute place for a big criminal to select as his hole, though," remarked another—"that is if one such has done so. I don't believe there's any one hiding in that tower."

"That remains to be seen," said Westcott. "There's a room at the top that you fellows know nothing about. Here we are. Quiet, now. You three are to guard the entrance, while MacWalters and I go up. If we want help, you'll get a signal. But be on your guard, and best have revolvers drawn. The Rook is not only a giant of strength, but the devil to boot. Should he rush out upon you unprepared, you would be as mere straws in his path."

"All right, Cap."

Having stationed the policemen to the best advantage at the entrance, the two detectives cautiously ascended the winding stair, revolver in hand, and Westcott being also provided with a dark-lantern.

They met with no interruption, and the chamber at the top was found to be as tenantless as on their previous visit with Silas Wiener.

It did not seem to have even been entered since, and they were turning away in the bitterest disappointment when MacWalters uttered an exclamation, and pounced upon something revealed by the shifting bull's-eye gleam at one side of the room.

"Look!" he cried.

"What is it?"

"A scrap of brown cloth. See; it was torn off by catching on that window-hook down there. Did Eva wear a brown dress when carried off, think you?"

"Yes. Let me have that. My friend, we are not altogether out of luck. This is a piece of the child's dress; I could almost swear to it. Ha! she has been here with her kidnapper, and doubtless quite recently."

"True—it must have been."

"Yes; he most likely kept her a prisoner here while he was off on his incendiary and murdering trip to the cottage."

"In returning for his captive then, he cannot have last quitted this place more than half-an-hour ago. What's to be done?"

"Let's step out on the balcony, and take a look around."

This they accordingly did, but the balcony

was very unsafe, the wooden railing having long since disappeared; nor was much to be seen from its lofty outlook, save the inside of the battered ruin, the space directly beneath where the policemen were keeping guard, and the top of an enormous linden tree, whose uppermost bare twigs shook in the wind but a few feet below and off from the balcony floor.

"Holloa, below there!" shouted Westcott at last, to the men below.

"Holloa yourself!" was the response.

"We find the room empty, but our man may be concealed somewhere in the stairway. One of you come up here, and look sharp in the ascent."

There was a consultation among the blue-coats, and then one of them disappeared into the entrance.

A moment later he was seen rushing out in consternation, followed by a puff of smoke or vapor.

"Jump for your lives!" was yelled up to the astonished detectives. "The staircase is mined and primed! Jump! jump!"

Westcott and MacWalters quietly exchanged one look, which both felt might very likely be their last, and then, after a parting hand-clasp, stood at the balcony's edge, overlooking the tree-top.

"You give the word, Mac," suggested Westcott. "We'll take the risk together."

There came another smoke-puff from the bottom of the tower, so far below.

"Now!"

They made the leap as one man, spreading out their arms and closing their eyes; but it was wholly as two men that they crashed down through the tree-top, and with somewhat varying fortune, though with fair enough luck in either case.

"How have you stood it?" called out MacWalters, who had secured stoppage in the tree somewhat higher up than his companion.

"Better than I hoped for," was the answer.

"Am sore all over, but with no bones broken as far as I know. How is it with you, old man?"

"Just about the same way. You see—"

Here there was an awful explosion. The great tower seemed to rise entire several feet into the air, and then it came down in fragments, with a crash that shook the earth.

Both detectives had, fortunately, escaped injury from the flying masses, and when they managed to rejoin the policemen a little later, it was found that the latter had likewise managed to successfully shelter themselves.

"How could a fuse have been left burning?" demanded Westcott. "We smelt nothing on ascending the stair."

"The mine had been planted far in under one of the broken stone steps," explained the man who had given the alarm. "My foot accidentally dislodged a stone that covered the vent, and then the smell of the burning fuse came out on me with a rush. I guessed the meaning of it, and lost no time in running back and yelling out, as you may believe."

At this juncture a slight, graceful figure came running toward them through the ruin.

"Papa Niel! Papa Westcott!" it screamed, joyously; "here I am. It's me, it's me!"

And then the lost-found Eva was sobbing in MacWalters's embrace, while Westcott fidgeted here and there in ludicrous efforts to snatch kiss after kiss from the tearful little face.

"My darling! my darling! Where are you last from?" cried Niel, as soon as he could collect himself. "Be quick, and let us know!"

"From under a big rock, away up there," replied the child, quickly drying her tears, and pointing up a rock-stream ridge just behind the ruin. "He had me there, but when the tower blew up, he snapped out: 'Skip, you little minx! the jig's about up.' And so I skipped."

Here a roaring, hollow sort of laugh resounded from up the ridge, and they saw the huge form of the Rook rear up among the rocks, and stand revealed for a minute, menacing and terrible, against the moon-silvered sky.

"Ha, ha, ha! Ho, ho, ho!" he laughed and shouted. "Hounds of the law! do you think that the great, the powerful, the mysterious Rook will not foil ye to the last?"

As many revolvers as there were pursuers were instantly discharged in his direction, but he seemed to bear a charmed life, and instantly disappeared over the ridge, with the three policemen in hot pursuit.

MacWalters had refrained from joining in the chase, on account of an unwillingness to leave the child, and Westcott had remained at his side.

"What is the use?" exclaimed the latter. "No runner living, I firmly believe, could overtake that extraordinary desperado over this broken ground. We shall have them back with us soon, and well blown at that."

This proved to be the case.

When the policemen had returned after a futile chase, even one of them who was accounted an expert runner candidly confessed that he had had no chance in holding his own with the giant fugitive.

"Which way was he heading when last seen?" demanded Westcott.

"Due south," was the reply.

"Good! we shall next look for him in the Merrydew Wall street offices. Eh, MacWalters?"

"That will be best, or, at all events, I can think of nothing better," was the reply. "Of course we'll have to leave the recovered will and Elsie with the ladies on our way down."

"Who's Elsie?" asked the little girl looking up, for MacWalters and Westcott each had one of her hands now.

"It is you, my darling? You are no longer rich and very important little girl. And you are going to live in the grand, beautiful house where the kind sweet ladies took so much interest in you. One of those ladies is your grandmother, the other—the stately and beautiful younger lady—is your aunt; and you're going to live with them always, and have pretty dresses, a nice carriage to ride in, and everything else that your heart can desire."

"I don't want to live with them, and I just sha'n't," blurted out the girl, ready to cry—"that is, not unless you live with us, too, Papa Niel, and make Papa Westcott visit us every other day."

MacWalters was more affected than he would like to have shown, and Westcott, who was a good-deal of a softy with children, began to cough suspiciously.

"Well, that may happen, too, my dear," said MacWalters, in a low voice. "Who knows? Stranger things than that have happened before this."

And thereat the little girl began straightway to take a more encouraging view of her future.

The policemen were not at liberty to accompany the detectives on their distant down-town quest, and accordingly separated from them.

It was past midnight when the recovered Elsie and the secured will were handed over to the keeping of Mrs. and Miss Carlingford, and it is not necessary to dwell upon the great and excessive joy that was occasioned thereby; nor yet upon the sense of horror that was imparted to their gentle natures by the fresh, stirring and tragic scenes of the night.

"One thing, Mrs. Carlingford, we must impress on your own and your daughter's minds," said Mr. Westcott, when his companion and he once more prepared to resume their pursuit of the Rook.

"And that is, to keep the will safe, now that we've got it back," returned the lady, smiling. "Isn't that what you were going to say, Mr. Westcott?"

"The very thing, ma'm. Don't on any account be easy in your mind as to its security, until you hear that Mr. Merrydew-Rook is either dead or in jail."

"Don't imagine that I shall cease to bear your advice in mind.—Ugh! I can't get over that horrible identicalness yet—the mere thought of it makes me shudder! As for the will, it shall be put in the safe out of which it was stolen, and my coachman and footman shall take turns in standing guard over it, with shotgun, revolver and carving-knife, till it is safely in my lawyer's hands to be submitted for probate. How will that do?"

"That, ma'm, will, I think, about meet the requirements of the case."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE CHASE CONTINUED.

THE detectives had scarcely passed the street-corner adjoining the Carlingford house, before a man, who had evidently just been violently thrown prostrate, staggered to his feet with a familiar cry.

It was Silas Wiener, and he was pointing after a powerful figure that was just vanishing out of the moonlight in among the shadows of the opposite Park.

"There! there!" he gasped. "'Tis he—the Rook! the Rook!"

They waited not to question, but darted at once, like bloodhounds, on the trail, followed by Wiener himself, who displayed astonishing wind and rapidity, in view of the rough usage he had latterly undergone.

Under ordinary circumstances, neither MacWalters nor Westcott, capital runners as both were, could have held their own for an instant with the all but incredible rapidity of the Rook's running powers.

But the latter had evidently become well-nigh exhausted, and had lost not a little of his phenomenal spryness when at his best.

They were hot on his track, and presently saw him flitting laboriously away from them up the wider of the three paths leading up the side of Mount Morris.

They made a grand burst of speed, rapidly gaining on him, until he suddenly disappeared at a level shelf of land to the right, that was seamed by a deep, narrow gully, nearly filled with mud and leaves as a result of the recent rains.

A moment later, the three pursuers, with revolvers drawn—even Wiener carrying an extra one that Westcott had hastily thrust into his hand—were carefully exploring the gully, whose entire length along the face of the escarpment was wholly or partly visible in the moonlight from end to end.

"He must be crouching somewhere hereabouts, and I'm sure he's in bad shape," said Silas, poking into the drain with a long stick that he had just picked up. "He limped horribly when he knocked me over, and could only glare breathlessly without saying a word."

"It's no wonder his wounds should have begun to tell on him," added MacWalters. "He must have received several of late, and without proper surgical attention—Ha!"

At that instant the Rook—dripping with water, and glaring like a hunted wolf—started up out of the gully almost at their very feet.

But before a weapon could be raised or a shot fired he was off like the wind along the wooded face of the crag, though the sound of his hoarse, labored breathing had been painfully audible.

But his pursuers were yet closer upon his desperate trail than before.

At last he was seen to dart straight up the crag, with goat-like agility, toward the foot of the old fire-bell and lookout-tower on the extreme verge of the crest.

His pursuers followed, but with more labor, strongly hoping that the desperate fugitive was nearly at the end of his rope, in point of both wind and strength.

"Here!" growled MacWalters, coming to a pause just as the fugitive climber was dragging his body over the top of the mount, "let's take no more chances, say I."

With that he fired, the shot being almost instantly followed by two others from his companions.

Then there was a united growl of disappointment, for the Rook had already dragged himself out of sight among the bushes and small trees along the summit of the precipice, some forty or fifty feet above their heads.

"A curse on the revolvers!" cried MacWalters, passionately. "Are they barrel-bent or no good at all, that we are thus to be cheated out of our lawful reward when within our very grasp?"

He would have dashed his pistol to the ground, but for a warning cry from Wiener.

"Look out!" yelled the latter. "Here comes the man, or his dead body, one or the other!"

Then the burly figure of the fugitive came plunging, crashing and rolling down, end over end, among them, with a gust of snarling interjections as it passed, and continuing on its way down through the clinging shrubbery and underwood.

"After him!" shouted MacWalters, wild with exultant excitement, and leading the rush down around the precipitous path. "He's winged at last! He's ours!"

By the time they had made the circuit to the foot of the mount a fierce, defiant laugh came floating to them, and they saw the Rook, limpingly but still swiftly, disappearing out of the Park by the southwest gate.

Before they could reach the same gate, he had stopped a cab, sprung on the back beside the driver, and was being borne away southward with a rapidity that defied a direct continuance of the pursuit.

"Accursed luck!" cried MacWalters, fairly stamping on the ground in his wrath and mortification; "is the scoundrel of iron, that he could stand a tumble like that, and yet slip out of our very grasp?"

"I reckon he's half-rubber and half-whale-bone," observed Silas. "At all events, for pure toughness, he takes the cake. In all my sojourns among the great ones of the earth, the crowned heads of Europe, the wallowers in the wealth of Ormus and of Ind—"

"Enough!" interrupted Westcott sternly. "Come; he's evidently off to his Wall street retreat—doubtless the last refuge left to him—and the Elevated Railroad is good enough for common folks like us."

On the way down-town MacWalters so thoroughly recovered his philosophical evenness of temper as to be ashamed of his recent outburst.

"I can't see but we'll yet have him, and on this chase," said he. "The scoundrel is evidently badly wounded, besides being almost spent. Ah, yes!" in a lower voice; "he'll be mine at last—mine, mine!"

And his fingers worked unconsciously as the vision of his wife and child, lying dead in their winding-sheet of snow, arose before him, with a huge shadowy shape dangling from a gibbet in the misty background.

With the help of a policeman on the Wall-street beat, they managed to arouse the janitor of the tall old building in which Merrydew had his oddly-arranged series of offices, and to convince him that he had better come down and admit them.

"And it's Mr. Merrydew ye want?" he exclaimed, sleepy and angry as he at last opened the door. "A purty time to be calling on a Wall-street lawyer!"

"Never mind; we want him—that's enough!" retorted Westcott, sternly displaying his badge. "Do you think he has entered here within half an hour?"

"How should I know? He has a night-key, and might enter at any time without me bein' the wiser."

"Light the gas all the way up."

The order was given with a peremptoriness that admitted of no dispute.

As the trio followed the janitor up the stairs, the policeman, who had received an inkling of the game afoot, looked as if he would mightily like to accompany them, but, as that would be quitting his beat without sufficient cause, he contented himself, no less than the others, by saying that he would mount guard at the lower entrance and see that there should be no escape by that means.

In a few minutes the party of man-hunters, including the janitor (a sturdy fellow named Kelly), were standing in the Merrydew office-den after forcing the door.

The dust lay more thickly than ever on books, papers and nondescript pieces of invalid furniture, there being no signs of the place having been occupied, or even entered, for many days.

"He may have stepped through it, however," said Westcott, concealing a growing sense of disappointment. "Let us take a look into the boudoir-apartment."

After the gas had also been lighted in the adjoining room—whose unexpected magnificence had a great effect upon both Wiener and Kelly—the detectives, as a primary measure, cautioned their companions of the existence of the trap-door at the side of the bed, and then looked curiously around them.

There had been an obvious change in the arrangement of the room, but how recently there was no determining.

The gorgeously draped and canopied bedstead alone retained its original position at one side.

The smashed Japanese cabinet was, also, still in place.

But all the rest of the luxurious furniture—table, chairs, divans, ottomans, etc.—had been set up carefully against the wall, leaving the central floor-space entirely unincumbered.

"What can it have been for?" said Westcott, meditatively. "Stand away from that trap, Silas!—Looks as if some one had been making ready for a big dance."

"A dance of death!" howled a terrible voice from directly overhead; "with corpses for partners. Ha, ha, ha! Ho, ho, ho!"

Then, not only the insignificant trap at the side of the bed, but almost the entire floor of the room, outside the skirting furniture-line, turned vertically, as if upon a powerfully operated pivot-rod running from side to side, and the entire party were incontinently precipitated into the next room below.

Here the flooring also turned at the jarring pressure of their fall, and down they plunged again.

An interruption was permitted at the next floor below that, which was, of course, the lumber-room in which Westcott and MacWalters had once before been imprisoned.

The monster trap-floorings had not instantly closed up again, and a fleeting upward glance afforded a glimpse of the author of this misfortune.

It was the Rook, or Merrydew, himself, whose hideous face was glaring, with demoniac, bloodshot eyes, down into the abyss from a trap hole in the ceiling of the boudoir-room, where he seemed to be grasping some sort of a crank, or lever—doubtless the commanding part of the secret machinery, set in the walls, by which he had effected the wholesale *chute*.

"Ha, ha, ha!" he roared again, but in a strangely dismal and despairing voice, it seemed to his hearers; "my last card, but nobly played!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

UNREST.

THEY the floors reclosed over the victims' heads, leaving them in darkness, save for a few gleams that filtered in through the door-cracks from the lighted passage without, and they could hear the fugitive descending the stairways, flight by flight, with great, halting bounds.

But in what a quandary had the misfortune plunged the search-party!

Wiener had fallen on his head, and was only now struggling back to sensibility; Kelly, the janitor, was groaning aloud, with a broken leg; and both MacWalters and Westcott, though without any broken bones, were sore, bruised and battered from head to foot.

"Och, but it's the devil himself!" cried the janitor.

"You're not far out, man!" said Westcott, who was already trying to minister to the poor fellow's comfort, while Niel was doing the same for Wiener. "Aren't you the same man that let my comrade and me out of this infernal hole once before?"

"Troth, and I am, sor! Is it both me legs that's bruck, think ye, or only wan?"

The poor fellow seemed to have kept his cultivated English for official occasions, it requiring some such misfortune as this to startle his original brogue to the surface.

"As near as I can make out," replied the detective, "it is only your left leg that has been fractured—somewhere above the knee, I fear."

Kelly relieved himself by uttering a long, dolorous and wrathful howl, before taking up an intelligent resumption of the situation.

"Och, it's murdered intoirely that I am, and me but a newly married man to the daisy of the First Ward!" he groaned.

"Be yourself, my man!" interposed MacWalters, who had by this time got Silas on his feet, with no other injury than an extremely sore head.

"Be gob! but it's some other man I'd be rejeiced to be at this minute, by the sign," was the ludicrous response.

"But even this floor may presently turn, also. Who knows how deep down the infernal machinery may extend?"

"That is true," said Westcott. Come, my man; brace yourself up, and tell us the best way out of this. You ought to know."

"Turn me over aisy. There's a bunch of keys in me right-hand pocket as might fit the door, Och, wurra, wurra! an' nie the gallus bridegroom of two nights ago."

The keys were produced, and fortunately one of them found to fit the lock.

But the thundering shock of the disaster had aroused the janitor's household, whose steps and cries of consternation were already heard, and by the time the lumber-room door was opened the lighted passage contained several of its members to welcome the prisoners forth.

Prominent among them was the unlucky Kelly's bride, who forthwith swooped down upon him with a hug, and, as the rest of the new-comers were his or her relatives, there was no doubt that he was in the best of hands.

Westcott gave them his address.

"Did none of you ever suspect the existence of that infernal system of trap-doors and trap-floors under Merrydew's control?" he demanded, at parting.

No; nothing of the sort had ever been "suspicioned befoore." Merrydew had been the tenant of the oddly-arranged rooms for several years, and on several occasions had had carpenters and other skilled mechanics at work in them at one thing or another. But their doings had been jealously guarded, and, as he was one of the best paying tenants in the building, they had not been especially inquired into.

The two detectives and their companion hurried down the remaining flights of stairs, in the hope that the Rook's flight might have been finally arrested by the policeman who had mounted guard at the main entrance.

Vain hope!

The officer was found prostrate and insensible on the tile-flagging just within the doors, with his broken club in one hand, his undischarged revolver in the other, and a terrible contusion on top of the head, from which the blood was gushing.

They succeeded, however, in restoring him to consciousness, and then, after lending him assistance as far as the station-house, where he was left to give his own version of the affair, the trio at last gathered under a street-lamp, wholly at a loss what next step to take.

"How are you feeling, Niel?" demanded Westcott.

"Like the last moments of an ill-spent life," was the hopeless reply. "In fact, utterly done up!"

"I, too," admitted the other. "We've done all that mortal men could do, though unsuccessfully, and I think the only thing that remains is to go home to bed."

"And leave the Rook to recuperate also—perhaps to escape us altogether?" exclaimed MacWalters, furiously clenching his hands.

"He won't escape, I feel sure of that. He is too far spent, and I doubt if he has now another refuge left. Besides, what more can we do, without sleep or recuperation?"

"I don't know."

"How is it with you, Silas?"

Silas wagged his head idiotically.

"Big thing, gentlemen, big thing!" he murmured, hazily. "Crowned heads of Europe—rolling in wealth—fountains of good whisky and rivers of beer!"

It was evident that he was still dazed from the shock to his alcoholized brain.

He stared stupidly, and his hands were gropingly clawing at the air, as if in the vain attempt to find something sorely needed, that had at the same time passed out of his memory.

Suddenly a glad light leaped into his pimply face, a hand found its way into an inside breast-pocket, from which he produced a pint whisky-flask, whose muzzle was the next instant glued to his lips.

"Take it away from him, Mac!" said Westcott. "He'll drink himself into helplessness."

"No, he won't," was the indifferent reply. "The infernal poison has become the fitful breath of life to the poor devil. Let him guzzle."

He spoke but truly.

Having drained the flask to the dregs, Silas was actually his old soaked, cynical, shrewd and philosophical self once more!

"Gentlemen," said he, blandly, "recollection flows back once more into my royal brain, to the thorough illumination of its lofty dome of thought. The Rook has again escaped us. What is next to be done? That is the question."

"What do you propose in your own case, for instance?" inquired Westcott.

"More whisky, and then a calm, refreshing and childlike snooze," was the characteristic response.

MacWalters laughed a hollow, mirthless laugh. The thought of the Rook having finally given them the slip was insupportable. His oath of vengeance might not obtain its crowning fulfillment; Mary and her child might even yet be unavenged!

But nothing else could be done, that had become evident.

They returned to the Elevated cars, MacWalters and Silas quitting them at the station contiguous to Paradise Corners, and Westcott continuing on up, the understanding between the two detectives that they were to meet again at the earliest possible hour of the following morning.

"Mr. MacWalters," said Wiener, in his most elegant and ceremonious tone, when they were about to separate in front of the distillery building, "I shall wish you good-night and also—good-by!"

He extended his hand in a peculiarly sincere and earnest manner.

"What do you mean?" inquired MacWalters, both puzzled and impressed.

"You have been kind to me, sir—far kinder than I have deserved—and we may not meet again."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. Something wrong here—perhaps a premonition—perhaps an erroneous warning—perhaps a solemn murmuring of the great To Be."

He tapped his head significantly, but without a particle of his old brazen and deceitful air.

"Nonsense!" said MacWalters. "It's only the whisky, with which you so pickle and corrode your insides."

But Silas shook his head gravely.

"No, my dear sir, not wholly that," he dissented. "Did it ever strike you, Mr. MacWalters, that I might have seen better days—have been a man of some education and refinement in fact?"

"Yes."

"Thank you. Do you happen to have ever heard these lines?" And he began to repeat them, impressively and with fine effect:

"A solemn murmur in the soul
Tells of the world to be,
As travelers hear the billows' roll,
Before they reach the sea."

"Silas Wiener," said the young man, after a reflective pause, "your life, so far as I know it, has been one of dishonesty and crime; and, to my certain knowledge, you were once at least indirectly concerned in an assassination."

"But why mention disagreeables, sir?" with a return of the old unconscionable bantering. "Why bring them up?"

"Simply in order to inquire if you ever think of repentance."

"Ah, there, sir, you touch me on my private affairs!" and he bowed hypocritically, with his hand on his heart. "That, sir, is a thing altogether between Silas Wiener and—and the great To Be."

"Well, go along with you!" and Niel opened the door at last. "I am half-dead with fatigue."

"One moment, sir; one moment!"

"What is it?"

"A mere trifle, sir, to you, but an important thing to me. My money is gone, my flask empty, and the rum-shop on the corner is yet open."

MacWalters was turning angrily away, when he reflected that Silas had not been such a bad servitor, after all.

He thrust a couple of dollars into the man's hand, closed and locked the door, and hurried up-stairs to the sleep and rest of which he was in such dire need.

It was two in the morning when he tumbled into bed, and was almost instantly unconscious.

It was still dark, however, when he awoke with a start, and with a feeling that some one was in the rooms with him.

He felt for his revolver, but it was gone.

His next sensation was that the air of the apartments was very hot, and apparently growing hotter.

He was about to spring out of bed, when the gas was suddenly turned up, and there was his arch-enemy, the Rook, confronting him with folded arms.

Supreme astonishment for the moment fairly took away MacWalters's breath.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE ROOK AT BAY.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the terrible intruder, but with something woefully despairing in its hollowness, as the young man again essayed to spring from the couch, but without success.

"You can't do it, my boy. I judged you rightly in your muscle-knotted sleep. You're almost as far gone as I am—almost, but not quite. Ha, ha, ha! Ho, ho, ho!" And the mirthless vibrations of his laugh were hollower and more desolate than before.

Rook-Merrydew was, indeed, in so pitiable a condition that MacWalters might have commiserated him, had he been other than he was.

His hair was disheveled, his powerful frame

convulsed with the anguish of terrible straining fatigue, his eyes rolling and bloodshot, his face showing a cadaverous, mortified hue where the walnut-dye of his fictitious swarthy skin, which had added not a little to the terrible of his Rook-personation, had worn off, permitting the floridness beneath to crop through in ugly spots and blotches.

"How came you here?" demanded MacWalters.

"Ha, ha! That is my secret," with a cunningly confidential air. "But I preceded you, and heard you enter. What would you, William Carlingford? It was my last refuge on earth, and a lucky thought brought it to my mind. I thought we might perish together as well here as elsewhere. Ha, ha!"

He seemed unable to begin or end an utterance without a repetition of that awful laugh.

Niel had started at the mention of his true name (which the reader will have long ere this divined), and this was the signal for a fresh mirthless roar.

"Yes, yes; we will die, though not exactly as we have lived, together, William; for you see I know you truly."

"That is no news to me," said MacWalters, making another ineffectual effort to rise. "As Merrydew I knew you as my father's infamous half-brother from the first."

"Ah, the deuce you did?" And Rook-Merrydew, who had been standing erect with a swaying motion, sunk heavily into a chair.

But the air had now become so hot as to be barely endurable.

"Monster! what have you done?" cried MacWalters, once more falling back, after another but partly successful effort to rise. "Have you fired the building?"

"Above and below," was the response, with such matter-of-fact calmness as to be more startling than the fitful violence it followed upon. "Why, as a matter of course, William. Ah! we have not lived amicably, but we shall die peacefully together, soaring down to hell hand in hand in the whirlwind of smoke and flame when the great spirits-crammed vats and stills of the lower floors explode with a glorious bang, as they soon must do. It is decreed!"

"Never!" cried MacWalters, as we shall still call him, in a frenzy of wrath and desperation. "Villain! execrable villain! it is not decreed that my death-hunted Mary and her child are not to be avenged!"

"It is decreed, William," with mournful impressiveness.

"It is not! God would not permit it. I have sworn to hunt you, monster, into the hangman's running noose, and my oath shall, must be fulfilled. As I have hunted down the gang, one by one, so shall I hunt down the leader! That is what is decreed!"

"Listen, William. In this solemn hour, in which we are certainly doomed to die together—mark how hot it is getting—I no longer hate you, as in the past. The hatred that I bore your family and yourself will have proved no less fatal to me than to you. It made you a disowned outcast, it is true—eventually a criminal, and lastly a criminal-hunter, an avenger, a sleuth-hound of your former associates. But, ruin of hope! what did it make of me? A criminal of criminals—their mysterious leader and despotic master—a monster, dyed to the lips with murder's blood and crime—without further hope here or hereafter! It was but my policy, my personal security, not my innate love of evil-doing, that caused me to hound your inoffensive wife and child to the grave. But—"

Here MacWalters, gnashing his teeth, fairly bounded on the bed in a renewed effort to burst through the species of muscular contraction, or, paralysis that still held him captive.

"But still," the other equably proceeded. "I could not but both hate and fear them somewhat on your account. Before you came into my gang I was waxing rich, I was its undisputed, terror-clothed, mysterious lord and master, and they, its ignorant, vice-sodden members but my veriest slaves, the tools of my purpose, by which I preyed upon society, while seldom incurring any personal risk, and obtained means for the luxurious, indolent and enjoyable life that had become my very breath. You came, and ruined all. It is to your indomitableness that I owe my ruin and the dispersion of my forces. But I forgive you, William. I can afford to. In this solemn hour—I can hear the hurrying approach of the flames; can't you?—when we are so surely to die together—"

"NEVER! I swear it!"

The interruption came from MacWalters in a perfect yell, and at that instant the spell that bound him was released.

He sprung from the bed, gathering up his garments with a sweeping grasp of one hand.

Then he espied the topaz-headed creese lying on the chimney-piece.

Seizing it frantically, he sprung, with another yell, straight at the Rook, who had quickly risen, with something of his original redoubtability, to bar his escape, though he presented no weapon.

MacWalters did not strike with the creese-blade, but with the clinched hand that grasped its hilt.

Then, to his astonishment, and notwithstanding that the blow delivered was a light one, the huge villain tottered and fell prone, so paralyzing was the exhaustion that had possessed his herculean frame.

"Don't leave me!" he whined, in a thin, tremulous voice. "Don't, William, my last, my dearest foe! I can't, I sha'n't roast alone!"

But Niel had already dashed out of the oven-like apartments, and was making for the trap-door ladder through the throbbing smoke—the staircases below were already in flames.

He heard a noise, as of Rook Merrydew scrambling to his feet, and lumberingly following, but paid no heed.

Holding his breath for fear of stifling, Niel cast away the weapon, but still held to his clothes, and at last, by the greatest good fortune, succeeded in groping his way to the foot of the ladder.

He sprung up the rungs like a mad-man, bursting aside the trap-covering like so much card-board.

As he sprung out on the roof with a spurning step, the ladder was thrown down.

"Give me a chance, too!" yelled, with frightful oaths, the Rook, who, having followed Niel's footsteps by their sound, had been prostrated by the heavy ladder falling on his head. "Curse your selfishness! My strength is gone—I can never raise this thing up again without help. William! don't leave me here to roast alone."

In spite of everything, MacWalters's sense of humanity was touched.

"Find your way to the next floor below," he called down. "There is a hoisting-block and tackle there, overhanging the narrow alleyway at the side. It is your only chance!"

He then darted along the sloping roof, toward the only point that offered safety (for the Rook had not boasted in vain, and even the roof was on fire in many places, caught from the up-curling flames that were being vomited by the lines of windows on three sides), and fortunately this was in the direction of an adjoining roof, protected by a staunch fire-wall.

After he had succeeded in surmounting this fire-wall, he was comparatively safe, and made the best of his breathing-time by getting into his clothes in the shortest possible order, while crouching away from the overpowering heat.

Mingling with the roaring of the flames, there ascended the sounds of many voices, and suddenly a great shower of water fell upon him.

The engines were already hard at work endeavoring to save adjoining buildings, while the distillery had been given over as doomed.

There came an explosion, followed by several others, seemingly vibrating the entire street-block to its foundations, but that was all, and he knew that that part of the danger was no longer to be dreaded.

CHAPTER XL.

AN APPALLING DOOM.

STILL shielding himself under the ledge of the fire-wall, MacWalters crept to the edge of the roof, and looked down.

The street was filled with an enormous crowd, who cheered him, for his face and shoulders shone out ruddily against the early morning sky in the fierce light of the adjoining flames, which were most luckily being wafted in the opposite direction.

He was showered by another jet of water, which was gratefully cool and refreshing.

Then a man in the crowd, whom he was quite sure he recognized as Westcott, hollowed his hands about his lips, and shouted up to him:

"Go along to the next roof! There's a scuttle-hole there."

He obeyed, though with difficulty in his exhausted and agitated condition, found the scuttle open, and was soon on his way down through the building to which it belonged, which proved to be a card-board and paper-box manufactory.

He was cordially greeted on his escape by a number of men who were gathered about the second-floor front windows, and quickly made his way to the street.

Here the first person to welcome him was James Westcott, who fairly caught him in his arms.

"Why, the alarm reached even me over half-an-hour ago!" exclaimed the delighted veteran. "I had almost given you over. How in the world did the fire start?"

MacWalters explained in as few words as he could command.

"Heavens and earth!" exclaimed the other; "can it be possible? But it is a worse doom than even the hangman could mete out to him."

"He might yet escape," said MacWalters. "I told him of the hoistway overhanging the alleyway. Perhaps he has been able to avail himself of it."

Westcott looked at him doubtfully.

"You told him?"

"Yes."

"You, the Avenger, the—"

"Enough of that, Westcott! Somehow I don't feel exactly as I did—or it may be a sort of weakness, for I am out of sorts—and an old injunction is coming back to me with a great deal of force."

"An old injunction?"

"Yes, and scriptural, at that."

"What is it?"

"Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord."

"Niel, you are a true man. Human vengeance, after all, is an unholy and miserably unchristian thing."

Here there was a rush of the multitude in the direction of the alleyway at the side of the burning distillery, to which an immense degree of excited attention was being attracted.

As MacWalters and Westcott permitted themselves to be borne along with the current, yells of, "Jump for it!" "Now or never!" "Who is he, anyway?" "How appalling!" and the like, came from the throng opposite the alley entrance.

MacWalters pressed his companion's arm.

"What did I tell you?" he whispered. "If he has shown himself at the gangway door, he ought to do yet more."

When they at last obtained a full view of the lofty alley-side of the burning building, an appalling spectacle was presented.

Rook-Merrydew stood in the gangway door, framed by the fierce glitter of the flames that fairly ringed him in on every hand, to right, to left, above and below, and dangling out over the alley space, scarcely two arm's lengths distant, was the hoistway, with its rigging as yet but little injured by the fire, and yet he seemed helpless.

His immensely muscular frame had not even been scorched, but it trembled perceptibly, and he seemed incapable of further exertion.

"Jump and grab for it!" bellowed a fireman in a tremendous voice. "The ropes will untwist themselves, and it's your last chance."

The miserable man shook his head and pointed to his legs.

"A craven at the wind up!" growled Westcott. "I wouldn't have believed it!"

"You're wrong," said MacWalters, calmly. "The man is fairly fainting with exhaustion, not to mention a number of wounds, old and new. How he even managed to reach the place he occupies up there is a mystery to me."

And then he became fascinated by the dreadful spectacle.

The same fireman roared out a renewal of his injunction, and a stream of water, being directed to a point on the wall immediately over his head, deluged him with a refreshing shower.

He seemed invigorated.

He was seen to stamp hard, as if to shock the numbness out of his legs, and then there was a breathless pause as it was seen that he was going to jump for the gearing.

He did so, but half missed his object, fought desperately, but only to the hopeless entanglement of the already warped and twisted cordage; and then, after a momentary gust of concealing smoke and flame had passed, a groan of horror arose from the crowd.

The unfortunate scoundrel had actually become noosed about the neck by a stubborn turn of one of the ropes, and was being both choked and roasted to death in full view of the multitude.

The Avenger's terrible oath was having a literal fulfillment.

The Rook was become his own executioner—had literally been hunted, neck-first, into a hangman's noose; and Fate was the officiating agent of retributive punishment!

As the stifled shrieks of the struggling victim arose above the crackling of the flames, the hissing of the spray-stream and the appalled murmurs of the horror-stricken crowd, Westcott turned to look at MacWalters.

The latter was frightfully pale, but sternly calm.

"It is Heaven's justice, not mine!" said he, in a low voice. "Oh, Westcott, Westcott! why will men ever venture the first step into crime, which must forever and ever work out its own, its awful punishment."

The alley-way was now one sheet of flame, only occasional gusts waving aside enough of the lurid curtain to show the still writhing suspended figure.

At last one of these glimpses showed it to be dangling still, but blackened, charred and motionless.

Then the gearing burnt away, and it fell.

Such was the doom of Jacob Merrydew, *alias* the Rook.

CHAPTER XLII.

CONCLUSION.

AFTER a good deal of trouble, Westcott managed to get Niel out of the thick of the crowd, which was by this time almost frantic with excitement.

By a sort of fatality, they came to a pause before the liquor store, several times alluded to in the foregoing pages, where a lesser sensation seemed to be under way.

There was a pressure roundabout the doors, and men were forcing their way in and fighting their way out.

"What's up?" demanded Westcott, displaying his detective badge to a policeman on guard.

"Bum found dead in Teddy's private soaking-room," was the reply, with a grin. "Or leastwise, they think as how it's a bum."

Westcott and MacWalters made their way into the place where the dead man was lying.

"Poor Silas!" muttered the former, while his companion abstained from comment.

Yes, the premonitory symptoms of the night before had not been causeless; and the dead "bum" of the "soaking-room" was or had been, Silas Wiener.

He still sat in the chair and at the table where he had been found dead a short time previously.

The drained glass was at his elbow, but there was something in the expression of the peaceful though bloated upturned face that only Niel had had a coming apparition of at their last parting.

"I'd got to know him by sight a good deal of late, or he wouldn't have been allowed to snooze away in here in my 'parlor-cabinet,' you know," the proprietor of the gin-mill was explaining. "But I reckon he was only a common sort of a bum. Howsomever, it may be a friend will turn up to save him from Potter's Field an' the doctors."

"I was his friend," said MacWalters, who had been scribbling something on a card. "Here is my address, and the address of an undertaker who will take charge of the remains at my expense."

When they had pushed their way out, he was even paler and more wretched-looking than before.

"Westcott," said he, faintly, "what I've been going through of late has knocked me out. Odd that you, being the older, should stand it so much better than I, isn't it? I'm completely done up."

"You look it, my boy! Come right up to my house with me."

"No, no, Westcott; take me home—get a cab, and take me home!"

The other looked at him quizzically, the words so strange as coming from a man who had just been burned out of house and bed.

"Good enough Niel. What address?"

"The Carlingford house. You must have suspected it before this, old man. I want to know my mother and sister once again as I ought to."

Westcott started, for all that he had more than suspected it, and the conveyance was speedily at their disposal.

The sun had almost but not wholly risen on a new and perfect day when Mrs. Carlingford came to them in the reception-room.

She looked worn, but was smiling and glad.

"You find me up to receive you," said she, "for the simple reason that I haven't been to bed at all. Our anxiety over your search, no less than our delight over our beloved Elsie, was enough to drive sleep from our eyelids."

Here Miss Carlingford, looking uncommonly fresh and happy under the circumstances, appeared.

"Elsie is in the dearest, sweetest sleep imaginable," she exclaimed. "But good-morning to you, gentlemen. You, Mr. Westcott, are bright enough, but Mr. MacWalters is looking far from well."

"He has just been burnt out," said Westcott.

"Burned out?"

"Yes; and our man-hunt is at last at an end."

The ladies clasped their hands.

"What!" they exclaimed; "Mr. Merrydew—the Rook?"

"Is no more!"

And Westcott forthwith gave them the account of the last stages of the desperate pursuit, and its terrible outcome.

They bore up under the relation better than could have been expected.

"An awful doom!" murmured Mrs. Carlingford. "It is now between him and his Maker."

"Let us try our best never even to think of him again," said Maud, with a shudder.

"Well, everything should be bright for you henceforth," exclaimed Detective Westcott, cheerily. "You have the restored will, and your grandchild is with you in security. Your happiness, ladies, ought to be unclouded from this time out."

They smiled back their acknowledgments, but with a certain reserve.

"We are very grateful," said Mrs. Carlingford, "for what Providence has so generously vouchsafed us, mainly with the services of you two as its instruments. It is now *our* time for generosity."

"Oh, that can be attended to at any time."

"No, no; there shall be no delay. I prefer it so."

"Well, the chief of our Department—"

"I can see him at my leisure. Apart from him and his Department, I want to make our grateful recognition to you two gentlemen a personal affair. Why doesn't Mr. MacWalters say something?"

"He is not well, mamma—and no wonder," interposed Miss Carlingford, with a sympathetic glance for the young man. "I wish he would allow me to ring for some wine for him."

MacWalters murmuringly declined the civility, and said something about Westcott being better able to do the talking than he.

"Well, ma'm," said Westcott, turning to the elder lady, "it is all for you to say, then. There were no particularly stated rewards offered, as we well know."

"That is true," was the reply, "and, for once in my life, I'm going to talk business, after my own woman's way, whether my lawyers should like it or not."

The police detective bowed.

"It stands about this way, I think: We two ladies are rich, and you two gentlemen are doubtless—well, somewhat the reverse."

Westcott burst out laughing.

"Don't be so considerate of our feelings, ma'm," said he. "For my part, at least, say, as poor as a church-mouse."

"Very well. If we give you each, in recognition of your individual services, a decent new house and lot in Harlem, and ten thousand dollars in cash, do you think it would be the fair thing?"

Westcott was dumb with astonishment.

Mrs. Carlingford colored.

"Why can't you be frank?" she cried. "I told you I wasn't much of a business woman, and if you think there is anything of parsimony in my offer, I am sure—"

"Parsimony?" echoed the astounded detective.

"Good Lord, ma'm! I never heard, read or dreamed of such generosity in my life! Bless me, ma'm! you fairly took my breath away."

"I am then to understand that my offer is agreeable?"

"Oh, yes, ma'm! on my part it is simply heavenly."

"And Mr. MacWalters?"

The latter colored, but made no reply.

"My friend here is in a queer position," said Westcott, coming to the rescue. "In fact, I doubt if he will accept anything from you, in the way of a reward."

"Not accept anything from me?"

"I'm afraid not."

"That would be strange," interposed Miss Carlingford once more. "Excuse my saying it, but I always somehow got the impression that he was the worse off of the pair of you."

"You divined nothing but the truth, Miss. He esteemed himself as having nothing in the world."

"Now I'll tell you a little story. Half-an-hour ago, when Niel and I were forcing our way out of the crowd incidental to the conflagration, he said to me: 'Westcott, I'm completely done up.'"

"You look it," I replied. "Come right up to my house with me."

"No, no; take me home—get a cab, and take me home!"

"Queer language, wasn't it, ladies, on the part of a man just burnt out of bunk, bed and everything he'd been supposed to possess in the world?"

"Good enough, my boy!" I responded.

"What address?"

"Carlingford house," he answered. "You must have suspected it before this. Oh, Westcott! I want to know my mother and sister once again as I ought to."

Miss Carlingford was the first to spring to her feet.

"The portrait up-stairs—the portrait!" she cried, her face blanching and reddening by turns. "Oh, mother! you remember what I once said about the resemblance?"

But, almost before she had done speaking Mrs. Carlingford had tottered out of her chair, and she was now sobbing on her lost-found's breast.

"This is too much joy!" she murmured. "My son, my William!"

"God is so good!" said Miss Carlingford, clasping her brother's disengaged hand, and kissing it through her fast falling tears.

But, tears of joy are always beautiful, and cannot be too fast-falling for either the life that is, or for the life eternal.

Westcott prudently took the opportunity of stealing away unperceived.

Our story is done.

William Carlingford had come to his own, and consequently Niel MacWalters, the Avenger, was no more.

Miss Maud Carlingford has not yet married, nor is it even known that she has yet a lover, though suitors and admirers by the score; but as she is still young, besides being so rich, beautiful and charming, she may be said not merely to have still a chance, but her selection where and wheresoever she may will to choose.

Mrs. Carlingford is one of the happiest widow ladies in New York, and so wrapped up in her noble son as to care no more than he for the occasional rumors whispered as to the shadiness of certain of his antecedents.

Poor Bella Liscomb died, without recovering her reason, after a year's confinement in Bloomingdale Asylum, where it was the care of the Carlingfords that she should want for nothing that money could supply.

Mrs. Charlotte Holdover is doing nicely as a Harlem milliner, and it is sufficient to say that neither Miss Carlingford nor her mother ever think of obtaining their head-wear elsewhere than of her, unless from Paris direct, which is not often; and even Elsie Ashner—who is growing up a beauty, both in mind and body—is at home when on a visit to the bonnet emporium of the sad but energetic widow of Asdrubal Holdover.

Honest James Westcott is now on the retired-list, but he is cheerful and well to-do in his pretty Harlem home, and the friendship between him and our whilom Niel MacWalters is as firm now as when cemented by danger and adventure in the eventful past.

THE END.

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